

PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND WORKFORCE EDUCATION ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, EMPLOYABILITY AND ENTREPRENEURIAL READINESS OF MARKETING STUDENTS IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explored marketing students' perceptions of the role of skill development and workforce education in shaping their academic performance, employability and entrepreneurial readiness. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of marketing students' experiences and perceptions regarding skill development and workforce education. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 22 marketing students drawn from selected public universities in South East Nigeria. To ensure the trustworthiness of the interview guide, the instrument was subjected to expert review by specialists in marketing education and educational research. A pilot interview was also conducted with participants who possessed characteristics similar to those of the study sample. Feedback obtained from the pilot interview was used to refine the interview questions for clarity, relevance and consistency. Dependability was further enhanced through the use of a standardized interview protocol during data collection. The interviews examined students' exposure to skill development activities, experiences with workforce education such as SIWES and internships, perceived usefulness of acquired skills, institutional support and readiness for employment and entrepreneurship. Findings indicate that skill development and workforce education are present within marketing programmes but are moderately implemented and largely constrained by theoretical teaching approaches, limited practical exposure and inadequate learning resources. Participants reported that skill development enhances their understanding of marketing concepts, improves confidence and increases employability awareness; however, it does not fully translate into job readiness without sufficient practical experience. Similarly, workforce education provides valuable exposure to real-world marketing environments but is weakened by poor structure, limited relevance to marketing practice and weak industry–university collaboration. The combined influence of both constructs was found to improve entrepreneurial awareness and foundational competencies, although students still expressed limited confidence in establishing independent ventures due to insufficient practical depth and mentorship. Based on these findings, the study recommends stronger integration of practical skill development into curriculum delivery, improved industry partnerships, restructuring of industrial training programmes, enhanced provision of digital learning resources and expanded mentorship and entrepreneurship support systems.

Keywords: Skill Development, Workforce Education, Marketing Students, Employability, Entrepreneurial Readiness, and Experiential Learning.

Introduction

In the 21st-century knowledge-driven economy, the demand for a highly skilled and adaptable workforce has intensified across all sectors, particularly in marketing, where innovation, digital competence and customer-oriented strategies are essential for success. Rapid changes driven by globalization and technological advancement have significantly reshaped the competencies required of marketing graduates, thereby placing increased responsibility on higher education institutions to equip students with relevant practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge (Jackson, 2019). In response to these evolving demands, greater emphasis has been placed on developing practical skills that enhance graduates' relevance in the labour market.

Skill development has emerged as a critical component of modern education systems due to its direct link with employability and productivity. According to Kotler et al. (2021), skill development enhances individuals' efficiency and effectiveness in performing tasks, thereby improving their capacity to meet labour market demands. Similarly, Okolie et al. (2020) explains that skill development involves acquiring the competencies necessary to perform tasks effectively and adapt to evolving workplace requirements. In the context of this study, skill development refers to the deliberate process of equipping marketing students with relevant practical, cognitive, digital and interpersonal competencies such as communication, analytical thinking and digital marketing skills that enable them to function effectively in contemporary business environments. Beyond the acquisition of these skills and competencies, it is equally important to consider the structured educational processes that facilitate their application in real workforce.

Closely related to skill development is the concept of workforce education, which focuses on preparing individuals for active participation in the labour market. Wickramasinghe and Perera (2021) emphasize that workforce education encompasses training and educational activities designed to align individuals' competencies with industry needs and organizational expectations. Furthermore, workforce development has been described as a range of structured strategies aimed at enhancing employees' skills and capabilities for improved performance and career sustainability (Lingio, 2024). Contextually, workforce education refers to structured educational and training experiences such as internships, industrial training, mentorship and industry collaboration that prepare marketing students for real-world work environments and enhance their employability.

Beyond workforce preparation, skill development has also been linked to students' academic performance. Academic performance refers to the extent to which students

successfully achieve intended learning outcomes and demonstrate mastery of course content through various academic activities and assessments. Contemporary studies suggest that students who acquire relevant cognitive, analytical and practical skills tend to demonstrate greater academic engagement, improved learning outcomes and enhanced problem-solving abilities. Cheng et al. (2025) found that employability-related skills positively influence academic performance by enabling students to understand course content more effectively and apply acquired knowledge in practical situations. Similarly, skill-based learning approaches have been associated with increased motivation, active participation and deeper understanding of subject matter, thereby contributing to improved academic achievement (Opesemowo et al., 2025). These findings suggest that skill development not only prepares students for future employment but also enhances their educational experiences and academic success.

Another important outcome associated with skill development and workforce education is employability. Employability extends beyond the ability to secure employment and encompasses the capacity to obtain, maintain and progress in meaningful work throughout one's career. Recent literature emphasizes that employability is shaped by the interaction between students' skills, educational experiences, institutional support and labour market conditions (Bisschoff & Massyn, 2025; Rothwell et al., 2025). Studies have consistently shown that graduates who possess both technical and transferable skills, combined with practical workplace experience, are better positioned to meet employer expectations and adapt to changing workplace demands (Alanazi & Benlaria, 2023). Consequently, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to provide opportunities that facilitate the development of competencies relevant to contemporary labour market requirements.

In addition to academic performance and employability, entrepreneurial readiness has emerged as an important objective of higher education, particularly in economies characterized by high youth unemployment and limited formal employment opportunities. Entrepreneurial readiness refers to an individual's preparedness to identify business opportunities, take calculated risks, mobilize resources and successfully initiate or manage entrepreneurial ventures. Literature suggests that skill development contributes significantly to entrepreneurial readiness by fostering innovation, creativity, critical thinking and opportunity recognition. Furthermore, workforce education initiatives such as internships, industrial training and industry exposure provide students with practical business insights and real-world experiences that enhance their confidence and ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Graduates who acquire practical, problem-solving and business-related skills are therefore more likely to

create self-employment opportunities and contribute to economic development through entrepreneurship (Nature Research, 2024).

In Nigeria, particularly in the South East region, concerns about graduate employability continue to grow as many university graduates are perceived to lack the practical skills required by employers. Evidence indicates that a significant proportion of graduates are unable to meet labour market expectations due to deficiencies in relevant skills, competencies and workplace readiness (Okolie et al., 2020). This gap has largely been attributed to an overemphasis on theoretical instruction within higher education, with limited opportunities for experiential and industry-based learning (Nature Research, 2024). Similarly, studies have identified curriculum-related issues, including poor alignment between university training and labour market needs, as a major driver of skills mismatch among graduates (Oviawe, 2020; Agbi, 2026).

Further empirical evidence suggests that the persistent mismatch between acquired skills and employer expectations continues to undermine graduate employability and contributes to rising unemployment rates (International Labour Organization, 2022; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2025). Recent reports also emphasize that weak industry–academic collaboration and inadequate integration of practical training in university curricula exacerbate this problem, leaving many graduates ill-prepared for modern workplace demands (Agbi, 2026). Consequently, there is need for an increasing advocacy to integrate skill development and workforce education into marketing programmes to enhance students’ readiness for the labour market.

Marketing students in South East Nigeria operate within a socio-economic environment characterized by high unemployment rates, increasing entrepreneurial activities, and rapidly evolving market structures. Recent evidence indicates that youth unemployment and underemployment remain significant challenges in Nigeria, particularly affecting graduates who lack job-relevant skills (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; International Labour Organization, 2022). At the same time, the South East region is widely recognized for its strong entrepreneurial culture and informal business sector, which places greater demand on graduates to possess practical and innovative marketing competencies (World Bank, 2020; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2021). Furthermore, the rapid transformation of markets driven by digital technologies and changing consumer behaviour has increased the need for marketing graduates who are not only theoretically grounded but also digitally skilled and adaptable (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022; Kotler et al., 2021). Given this context, the need for practically skilled marketing graduates is particularly critical. Therefore, examining how skill development and workforce education influence marketing students’ academic performance,

employability, and entrepreneurial readiness is essential for both educational advancement and economic development.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of these constructs, empirical studies that specifically examine the combined influence of skill development and workforce education on marketing students in South East Nigeria remain limited. Existing literature has largely focused on general graduate employability and skills mismatch without sufficient attention to discipline-specific dynamics such as marketing education (Okolie et al., 2020; Lingio, 2024). Moreover, regional disparities in educational outcomes and labour market conditions in Nigeria are often overlooked, thereby limiting the applicability of generalized findings to specific contexts like the South East (Oviawe, 2020). Scholars have also emphasized the need for more context-driven and discipline-specific studies that examine how educational interventions translate into measurable competencies and career outcomes (Tomlinson, 2019). This gap necessitates a focused investigation into how these educational strategies impact marketing students' competencies and career outcomes within the South East Nigerian context.

It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to explore the perceived influence of skill development and workforce education on the academic performance, employability and entrepreneurial readiness of marketing students in South East Nigeria. This background highlights the urgent need for a more practice-oriented and industry-aligned approach to marketing education in Nigeria, particularly in the South East, where economic realities and labour market expectations demand a workforce equipped with relevant, adaptable and market-driven skills.

Statement of the Problem

Ideally, marketing education in Nigerian universities, particularly in the South East, is expected to produce graduates who possess a balanced mix of theoretical knowledge and practical competencies required for effective performance in modern business environments. Such graduates should demonstrate skills in digital marketing, data-driven decision-making, communication and problem-solving, alongside entrepreneurial capabilities that reflect the region's strong commercial orientation. To achieve this, skill development and workforce education are expected to be integrated into marketing curricula through experiential learning, internships and industry collaboration, thereby enhancing students' academic performance and employability.

However, the current reality shows a gap between these expectations and actual outcomes. Many marketing graduates in Nigeria lack practical and job-relevant skills due to

the dominance of theoretical instruction and limited exposure to real-world business practices. In addition, inadequate integration of workforce education strategies, weak industry–academic collaboration, and poor adaptation to digital marketing trends have contributed to a persistent mismatch between graduates’ competencies and labour market demands.

If this gap persists, it may lead to increased graduate unemployment and underemployment, reduced productivity and limited capacity for innovation and business growth in the region. Over time, this disconnect could weaken the relevance of marketing education and reduce confidence in university programmes as effective pathways to career success. Therefore, there is a need to examine how skill development and workforce education can be leveraged to improve the skills, competencies and career outcomes of marketing students in South East Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study was to explore the perceived influence of skill development and workforce education on the academic performance, employability, and entrepreneurial readiness of marketing students in South East Nigeria.

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine marketing students' perceptions of the availability and effectiveness of skill development opportunities within their academic programmes.
2. Explore the perceived influence of skill development on the academic performance and learning experiences of marketing students.
3. Investigate the perceived influence of workforce education experiences, including industrial training and internships, on the employability of marketing students.
4. Examine how skill development and workforce education contribute to the entrepreneurial readiness of marketing students in South East Nigeria.

Literature Review

Concept of Skill Development in Higher Education

Skill development has gained significant attention in recent years as higher education institutions increasingly shift towards producing graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also competent in practical and transferable skills. Contemporary literature emphasizes that skill development encompasses a broad range of competencies, including critical thinking, communication, digital literacy, and problem-solving abilities that are essential for navigating modern labour markets (Jackson, 2019). Recent studies further highlight that the integration of these competencies into academic programmes enhances students’ capacity to adapt to

changing workplace demands and sustain long-term career growth. For instance, research indicates that deliberate skill acquisition significantly improves graduates' employability and productivity, especially in knowledge-driven economies (Nature Research, 2024).

In addition, empirical evidence suggests that students often recognize the importance of skill development but face challenges in effectively acquiring and applying these competencies due to gaps in curriculum design and teaching approaches (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2025). This highlights the need for structured and intentional integration of skill development within higher education systems.

Workforce Education and Experiential Learning

Workforce education has emerged as a critical mechanism for bridging the gap between academic learning and labour market expectations. It involves structured learning experiences such as internships, industrial training, and university–industry collaborations that expose students to real-world work environments. Recent literature emphasizes that employability is not solely determined by academic knowledge but is shaped by the interaction between students' skills, institutional practices and labour market conditions (Bisschoff&Massyn, 2025; Rothwell et al., 2025). Furthermore, studies show that experiential learning opportunities such as internships and work placements play a significant role in enhancing students' practical competencies, professional behavior and career readiness (Norton & Dalrymple, 2020; Wahab et al., 2025).

In the Nigerian context, Jackson and Tomlinson (2025) found that university–industry collaboration significantly improves graduate employability by facilitating curriculum relevance and practical exposure, although such collaborations remain underutilized. This highlights the importance of strengthening workforce education initiatives within higher education institutions.

Skill Development and Academic Performance

The relationship between skill development and academic performance has been widely explored in recent literature. Studies indicate that students who acquire relevant cognitive and practical skills tend to demonstrate improved academic engagement and achievement. For example, Cheng et al. (2025) found that employability skills positively influence academic performance, as students who possess higher levels of competencies are better able to understand course content and apply knowledge effectively. Similarly, research suggests that skill-based learning approaches enhance students' motivation and learning outcomes by

promoting active participation and deeper understanding of subject matter (Opesemowo et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the argument that skill development is not only beneficial for employability but also for academic success.

Skill Development, Workforce Education and Employability

A substantial body of literature establishes a strong link between skill development, workforce education and graduate employability. Employability is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional construct that includes the ability to obtain, maintain and progress in employment, rather than merely securing a job (Wahab et al., 2025). Recent studies demonstrate that graduates who possess both technical and soft skills, combined with practical work experience, are more likely to meet employer expectations and succeed in the labour market (Alanazi & Benlaria, 2023). However, evidence also indicates that a persistent skills mismatch exists between higher education outcomes and labour market needs, particularly in developing countries. This mismatch is often attributed to insufficient practical training, weak industry linkages, and outdated curricula (World Bank, 2020).

Entrepreneurial Readiness and Skill Development

Entrepreneurial readiness has become an important outcome of higher education, particularly in regions with high unemployment rates. Literature suggests that skill development plays a crucial role in fostering entrepreneurial competencies such as innovation, risk-taking, and opportunity recognition. Studies show that graduates who acquire practical and problem-solving skills are better equipped to engage in entrepreneurial activities and create self-employment opportunities (Nature Research, 2024). Moreover, workforce education initiatives such as internships and industry exposure contribute to entrepreneurial readiness by providing students with real-world insights and business experience, thereby enhancing their confidence and ability to start and manage ventures.

Identified Gap

The reviewed literature indicates that skill development and workforce education contribute significantly to students' academic performance, employability, and entrepreneurial readiness. However, most existing studies have focused on university students and graduates in general without specifically examining marketing students, whose academic and professional preparation requires a unique combination of communication, analytical, digital, and entrepreneurial competencies. Furthermore, much of the existing literature relies on quantitative approaches that emphasize measurable outcomes while providing limited insight

into students' perceptions and experiences regarding skill development and workforce education. There is also a scarcity of studies situated within the South East Nigerian context, where socio-economic and institutional conditions may shape students' educational and career preparation differently. This study therefore addresses these gaps by qualitatively exploring the perceived influence of skill development and workforce education on the academic performance, employability, and entrepreneurial readiness of marketing students in South East Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored on the Human Capital Theory and the Experiential Learning Theory. These frameworks are integrated to explain the influence of skill development and workforce education on marketing students at two complementary levels: (i) acquisition of relevant competencies and (ii) application of knowledge through experiential learning processes.

Human Capital Theory (HCT)

The Human Capital Theory was developed by Gary Becker (1964). The theory posits that investment in education, training and skill acquisition enhances individuals' productivity, efficiency and economic value. This means that individuals and institutions invest in human capital development with the expectation of future returns in the form of improved performance and employability. Contemporary scholars have extended this perspective by emphasizing that modern education must focus on market-relevant and transferable skills rather than mere theoretical knowledge (Tomlinson, 2019; Marginson, 2019).

Within the context of this study, Human Capital Theory provides the competency-level lens for understanding how skill development contributes to marketing students' academic performance, employability and entrepreneurial readiness. Skill development initiatives such as digital marketing training, communication skills and analytical competencies are viewed as investments that enhance students' value in the labour market. Thus, the theory explains why students who acquire relevant and practical skills are more likely to succeed both academically and professionally.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

The Experiential Learning Theory was developed by David Kolb in 1984. The theory emphasizes that learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Kolb identifies a four-stage learning cycle consisting of concrete experience,

reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Recent studies have reinforced the relevance of experiential learning in higher education, particularly in bridging the gap between theory and practice (Morris, 2020).

In relation to this study, Experiential Learning Theory provides the application-level lens, explaining how workforce education facilitates the practical application of acquired skills. Activities such as internships, industrial training, mentorship programmes and industry collaboration enable marketing students to engage with real-world business environments, thereby enhancing their understanding and competence. This theory suggests that workforce education is essential for transforming theoretical knowledge into usable skills that improve students' readiness for employment and entrepreneurial engagement.

Integration of Theories

The integration of Human Capital Theory and Experiential Learning Theory provides a comprehensive framework for this study. While Human Capital Theory explains the importance and outcomes of skill acquisition, Experiential Learning Theory explains the process through which these skills are applied and refined in real-world contexts. This integrated framework enables a deeper understanding of how universities can design curricula that not only build competencies but also ensure their practical application through structured learning experiences.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to explore marketing students' perceptions of skill development and workforce education in South East Nigeria. The design was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' views, experiences, and interpretations of a phenomenon within its natural context. Through semi-structured interviews, the study explored students' experiences of skill acquisition and workforce education activities and how these experiences shape their academic performance, employability, and entrepreneurial readiness.

Population of the Study

The population for the study comprised 373 final-year (400 level) Business Education students in public universities in South-East Nigeria. Specifically, the population included: 20 students from University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN); 33 from Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Agbani; 131 from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; 30

from Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam; 39 from Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo; 34 from Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki; 55 from Imo State University, Owerri; and 31 from Abia State University, Uturu.

These students were considered suitable participants because they are at the final stage of their academic training and are expected to have been exposed to both theoretical and practical components of marketing education, including skill development initiatives and workforce education experiences. Their proximity to graduation also positions them to provide informed insights into how these experiences have shaped their academic learning, employability readiness and entrepreneurial intentions.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 22 students was purposively selected for in-depth interviews. Purposive sampling will be employed to ensure that only participants who have relevant experiences with skill development activities (such as practical coursework, digital training, or skill-based instruction) and workforce education practices (such as SIWES, internships, or industry exposure) are included in the study. Participants was drawn from selected universities across the South East to ensure diversity of experiences and institutional representation. The selection will also consider factors such as exposure to industrial training, participation in entrepreneurship programmes, and engagement with digital marketing tools.

Adequacy of Sample and Saturation

Sample adequacy was determined using the principle of thematic saturation. Interviews was conducted until no new themes or significant insights emerge from additional data collection. The process was iterative, with ongoing analysis guiding decisions about when sufficient depth and breadth of information have been achieved. The final interviews served to confirm and stabilize emerging themes across participants.

Researcher Reflexivity

Given the interpretive nature of qualitative research, reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to minimize bias. The researcher kept reflective notes to monitor personal assumptions, maintain neutrality during interviews and document decisions made during data analysis. This process enhanced transparency and ensure that findings are grounded in participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's preconceived notions.

Interview Guide

1. Can you describe your academic programme and your experience as a marketing student?
2. What types of skill development activities (e.g., practical courses, digital training, group projects) have you been exposed to during your studies?
3. How useful do you find these skill development activities in enhancing your understanding of marketing concepts?
4. Can you describe any workforce education experiences you have had, such as SIWES, internships, or industry-related training?
5. How have these experiences influenced your practical knowledge of marketing?
6. Do you think you have acquired adequate skills to function effectively in the labour market or to establish your own business after graduation? Why or why not?
7. What specific skills (e.g., digital marketing, communication, analytical skills) do you consider most important for marketing students today?
8. How supportive are your lecturers and institution in promoting skill development and practical learning?
9. What challenges have you encountered in acquiring practical marketing skills during your programme?
10. In what ways have skill development and workforce education influenced your academic performance?
11. How prepared do you feel for employment or self-employment after graduation?
12. What improvements would you suggest for enhancing skill development and workforce education in your programme?
13. What role should universities and industry partners play in improving students' readiness for the labour market?
14. To what extent have the skills and experiences acquired during your programme prepared you to start and manage your own business or entrepreneurial venture?
15. What additional skills, training, or support do you think marketing students need to become successful entrepreneurs after graduation?

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted either face-to-face or virtually (via platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet), depending on participants' availability. The semi-structured format provided flexibility to explore participants'

experiences in depth while maintaining alignment with the study objectives. The interview guide was developed in line with the research objectives and theoretical framework. It covered key areas such as students' exposure to skill development, experiences with workforce education (e.g., internships and SIWES), perceived usefulness of acquired skills, institutional support and readiness for employment and entrepreneurship. Open-ended questions were supported with probing and follow-up questions to encourage participants to provide detailed responses and real-life examples.

Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. Although time-bound, depth was achieved through focused questioning and probing for clarification and elaboration. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, with subsequent interviews confirming recurring patterns and themes. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were carefully reviewed alongside the recordings to minimize errors before proceeding to data analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, followed by systematic coding and categorization of emerging themes. Codes were generated inductively from participants' responses and grouped into broader categories reflecting key concepts such as skill development experiences, workforce education exposure, employability readiness, academic performance and challenges encountered. These categories were further refined into overarching themes that captured patterns and relationships within the data. Thematic analysis was considered appropriate for this study because it allows for a detailed and systematic interpretation of qualitative data while capturing participants' perspectives and lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and no identifying information was included in the final report. All data collected were used strictly for academic purposes and were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Results

Findings for Research Question 1:

What are marketing students' perceptions of the availability and effectiveness of skill development opportunities in South East Nigeria?

Theme 1: Moderate Exposure to Skill Development Opportunities

A majority of participants (approximately 14–18 out of 22 participants) reported that they had been exposed to various skill development opportunities within their marketing programmes. These opportunities included group assignments, classroom presentations, case studies, practical exercises and collaborative learning activities. However, participants indicated that such opportunities were not consistently available across all courses and departments.

One participant explained:

“We do presentations and group work and sometimes practical examples are given, but it is not in all courses. Some lecturers still focus mainly on theory.”

These responses suggest that while skill development opportunities exist within marketing programmes, their implementation remains uneven and insufficiently institutionalized.

Theme 2: Emphasis on Theoretical Learning over Practical Skills

A substantial number of participants (about 16–20 participants) emphasized that their learning experience is still largely theory-driven. They noted that lectures often focus on conceptual explanations with limited opportunities for hands-on practice or real-life application.

One participant noted:

“Most of what we learn is theoretical. We understand the concepts, but applying them in real business situations is still a challenge.”

This pattern indicates that despite awareness of the importance of skill development, practical engagement remains insufficient.

Theme 3: Awareness of the Importance of Digital and Marketing Skills

A moderate group of participants (approximately 10–14 participants) demonstrated strong awareness of the importance of acquiring relevant marketing skills, particularly in areas such as digital marketing, social media management, and data analysis. These students expressed a desire for more structured opportunities to develop such competencies.

One participant stated:

“Digital marketing skills are very important now. Many of us try to learn them on our own because they are not fully covered in class.”

This suggests that students recognize the relevance of skill development but often rely on self-directed efforts to acquire these skills.

Theme 4: Limited Access to Structured Skill Development Resources

A smaller group of participants (approximately 6–8 participants) highlighted challenges related to limited access to resources such as modern digital tools, marketing software, and practical training facilities. These constraints were seen as barriers to effective skill acquisition.

As one participant explained:

“We don’t really have access to tools like marketing software or analytics platforms. So, it’s difficult to gain practical experience.”

These accounts indicate that infrastructural and institutional limitations may hinder the effective development of practical marketing skills.

Findings for Research Question 2:

How does skill development influence the academic performance and learning experiences of marketing students in South East Nigeria?

Theme 1: Skill Development Enhances Understanding of Marketing Concepts

A majority of participants (approximately 15–18 out of 22 participants) indicated that exposure to skill development activities such as group assignments, presentations, and practical class discussions improved their understanding of marketing concepts. They reported that these activities helped them move beyond memorization to better comprehension and application of course content.

One participant explained:

“When we do presentations and practical examples, it becomes easier to understand the topics compared to just reading theory.”

These responses suggest that skill development contributes positively to students’ academic engagement and conceptual clarity.

Theme 2: Improved Confidence and Classroom Performance

A substantial number of participants (about 12–16 participants) reported that skill-based activities improved their confidence in academic tasks such as presentations, discussions and

examinations. They explained that continuous exposure to practical tasks enhanced their ability to express ideas clearly and perform better academically.

One participant stated:

“Before, I was shy during presentations, but now I can speak confidently because of the group work we do in class.”

This indicates that skill development contributes not only to cognitive learning but also to behavioural and communication improvements that enhance academic performance.

Findings for Research Question 3:

What is the perceived influence of workforce education on the employability of marketing students in South East Nigeria?

Theme 1: Limited but Valuable Exposure to Workforce Education

A majority of participants (approximately 14–17 out of 22 participants) reported that they had some form of exposure to workforce education activities such as SIWES (Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme), internships, or short-term attachments. However, many indicated that the exposure was often brief, poorly structured, or not directly aligned with their field of marketing.

One participant explained:

“I did SIWES, but most of the time I was not really doing marketing-related work. It was more of general office duties.”

These responses suggest that while workforce education exists, its relevance and depth vary significantly across students.

Theme 2: Workforce Education Improves Practical Understanding of Marketing

A substantial number of participants (about 13–16 participants) indicated that their exposure to workplace environments helped them better understand how marketing works in real-life business settings. They reported that such experiences bridged the gap between theory and practice.

One participant stated:

“During my internship, I saw how customer relations and sales strategies actually work. It made what we learned in class more meaningful.”

This indicates that workforce education enhances experiential understanding and reinforces classroom learning.

Theme 3: Skill Development Supports Employability Awareness but Not Full Job Readiness

Many participants (approximately 14–17 participants) acknowledged that skill development activities increased their awareness of employability requirements. However, they also expressed concern that these activities alone were not sufficient to fully prepare them for the labour market.

One participant noted:

“We are beginning to understand what employers expect, but we are still not fully ready for real jobs because we lack practical industry experience.”

This suggests that while skill development improves employability awareness, it does not fully translate into job readiness without practical exposure.

Theme 4: Self-Initiated Skill Acquisition Enhances Employability Prospects

A moderate number of participants (about 10–13 participants) reported that they engage in self-learning activities such as online courses, YouTube tutorials, and internships to complement classroom learning. These participants believed that such efforts significantly improve their employability prospects.

One participant explained:

“I learned digital marketing on my own online because it is not fully taught in class. It has helped me understand how marketing works in real companies.”

This indicates that students who take additional steps to develop their skills perceive themselves as more employable

Theme 5: Persistent Gaps in Job Readiness

Many participants (approximately 15–18 participants) despite positive perceptions of workforce education, still expressed concerns regarding their overall preparedness for employment. They attributed these concerns to limited duration of workplace experiences, inadequate supervision and insufficient opportunities for practical engagement.

One participant stated:

“It helped me understand what companies expect, but the experience was too short to really build strong job skills.”

This finding suggests that employability awareness does not necessarily translate into complete job readiness.

Theme 6: Challenges in Workforce Education Implementation

Several participants (about 10–12 participants) highlighted challenges such as poor placement opportunities, weak university–industry collaboration and inadequate supervision during industrial training.

One participant explained:

“Sometimes students are just posted anywhere, not necessarily in marketing departments, so the experience is not very useful.”

These challenges reduce the effectiveness of workforce education in achieving employability outcomes.

Findings for Research Question 4:

What is the combined influence of skill development and workforce education on the entrepreneurial readiness of marketing students in South East Nigeria?

Theme 1: Combined Exposure Enhances Entrepreneurial Awareness

A majority of participants (approximately 15–18 out of 22 participants) indicated that the combination of skill development activities and workforce education exposure increased their awareness of entrepreneurship opportunities. They reported that classroom-based practical activities alongside limited internship experiences helped them understand basic business operations and marketing processes.

One participant explained:

“The group projects and my SIWES experience made me realize that I can actually start something small if I apply what I have learned.”

These responses suggest that the integration of both learning experiences helps stimulate entrepreneurial thinking among students.

Theme 2: Development of Basic Entrepreneurial and Marketing Skills

A substantial number of participants (about 14–17 participants) reported that skill development and workforce education contributed to the acquisition of foundational entrepreneurial skills such as communication, customer handling, sales promotion, and digital marketing awareness.

One participant stated:

“I learned how to communicate with customers and even how to promote products online through assignments and internship experience.”

This indicates that both academic and workplace learning contribute to building basic entrepreneurial competencies.

Theme 3: Limited Confidence for Full Business Start-Up

Despite increased awareness, many participants (approximately 13–16 participants) expressed that they do not yet feel fully confident to establish or manage a business independently. They attributed this to insufficient depth of practical experience, limited capital knowledge and lack of mentorship.

One participant noted:

“I understand the idea of starting a business, but I still don’t feel ready because I lack real business experience and guidance.”

This suggests that while readiness is emerging, it is not yet fully developed.

Theme 4: Need for Greater Integration of Theory, Practice and Mentorship

A significant group of participants (about 10–17 participants) emphasized the need for stronger integration between classroom learning and real-world business exposure. They suggested that more structured entrepreneurship training, mentorship programs, and industry collaboration would better prepare them for self-employment.

One participant explained:

“If we had more practical entrepreneurship training and mentorship, it would be easier for students to start their own businesses after school.”

This highlights a perceived gap in the current educational structure.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from Research Question 1 revealed that marketing students in South East Nigeria have moderate exposure to skill development opportunities, although the implementation of such opportunities remains inconsistent and largely characterized by theoretical instruction. Participants acknowledged the availability of activities such as presentations, group assignments and practical exercises, but noted that these opportunities were not uniformly integrated across courses. Students also demonstrated awareness of the growing importance of contemporary marketing competencies, particularly digital marketing and analytical skills, while expressing concerns regarding limited access to practical learning resources. These findings align with earlier studies which suggest that higher education institutions in many developing countries continue to emphasize theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical skill acquisition (Tomlinson, 2019; Marginson, 2019). The findings further support the argument that effective skill development requires not only curriculum inclusion but also adequate institutional support and learning infrastructure.

From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, education is expected to develop productive competencies that enhance individual and societal outcomes. However, the findings suggest that the conversion of educational experiences into practical skills remains only partially achieved, leading many students to rely on self-directed learning to acquire market-relevant competencies.

The findings from Research Question 2 indicate that skill development positively influences marketing students' academic performance and learning experiences. Participants reported that skill-based activities enhanced their understanding of marketing concepts, improved their confidence during presentations and discussions, and increased their overall engagement in academic activities. These findings support the work of Cheng et al. (2025), who found that the acquisition of employability-related skills contributes to improved academic achievement by enabling students to apply knowledge more effectively. Similarly, the findings are consistent with Opesemowo et al. (2025), who reported that skill-based learning approaches promote active participation, deeper comprehension and improved learning outcomes. The results suggest that skill development contributes not only to knowledge acquisition but also to the development of communication and interpersonal competencies that strengthen students' academic experiences.

The findings from Research Question 3 revealed that workforce education plays a significant role in enhancing students' employability by providing exposure to workplace realities and increasing awareness of employer expectations. Participants reported that experiences such as SIWES, internships and workplace attachments improved their practical understanding of marketing activities and exposed them to professional work environments. The findings further revealed that students actively engage in self-directed learning and additional skill acquisition to improve their employability prospects. These results support Norton and Dalrymple (2020), who emphasized that experiential learning opportunities enhance professional competence and workplace readiness. The findings are also consistent with studies that highlight the importance of workplace exposure in developing employability competencies and career awareness (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2021; Wahab et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, participants expressed concerns regarding limited job readiness despite increased employability awareness, citing inadequate workplace exposure, poor supervision and weak alignment between placement experiences and marketing practice. The study also identified challenges such as weak university–industry collaboration and poor placement coordination, which reduce the effectiveness of workforce education programmes. From the perspective of Experiential Learning Theory, meaningful learning occurs when concrete

experiences are effectively linked to reflection, conceptualization and application. The findings suggest that while students are exposed to workplace experiences, weaknesses in programme structure and implementation may limit the full realization of experiential learning outcomes.

The findings from Research Question 4 revealed that the combined influence of skill development and workforce education contributes positively to the entrepreneurial readiness of marketing students. Participants reported that exposure to practical learning activities and workplace experiences increased their awareness of entrepreneurial opportunities and facilitated the development of foundational entrepreneurial competencies such as communication, customer relations, sales promotion and digital marketing skills. These findings support previous studies which argue that entrepreneurial readiness is strengthened when students acquire both practical and transferable skills alongside workplace exposure (Nature Research, 2024). However, despite increased entrepreneurial awareness, many participants indicated that they lacked sufficient confidence to establish and manage businesses independently. This lack of confidence was attributed to limited practical business experience, inadequate mentorship and insufficient entrepreneurial support structures. These findings align with previous studies which suggest that entrepreneurship education in many developing contexts remains largely theoretical and often fails to provide the practical experiences necessary for venture creation and business management (Igwe et al., 2021; Oviawe, 2020). The findings therefore highlight the need for stronger integration of entrepreneurship training, mentorship opportunities and practical business exposure within marketing education programmes.

Conclusion

This study explored the perceived influence of skill development and workforce education on the academic performance, employability and entrepreneurial readiness of marketing students in South East Nigeria. The findings revealed that while marketing students are exposed to skill development opportunities and workforce education experiences, their implementation remains largely moderate and constrained by limited practical exposure, inadequate resources and weak industry collaboration. Nevertheless, skill development was found to enhance students' academic understanding and confidence, while workforce education improved employability awareness and practical workplace exposure. The combined influence of both constructs also contributed to entrepreneurial awareness and the development of foundational entrepreneurial competencies. The study concludes that strengthening practical

learning opportunities, industry engagement and entrepreneurship support systems is essential for improving the academic and career outcomes of marketing students.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that universities should strengthen the integration of practical skill development into marketing curricula by ensuring that teaching methods consistently incorporate case studies, simulations, digital marketing tasks, and project-based learning so that students can apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations.
2. Stronger collaboration should be established between universities and industry stakeholders through formal partnerships, guest lectures and advisory engagements to ensure that students are exposed to current industry practices and expectations.
3. Workforce education programmes such as SIWES and internships should be restructured to ensure that students are placed in relevant marketing-related environments, properly supervised and assessed based on practical outcomes that reflect real workplace demands.
4. Universities should invest in digital learning resources and marketing technologies by providing access to simulation tools, analytics platforms and modern marketing software to enhance students' practical exposure to contemporary marketing practices.
5. It is also recommended that structured mentorship and entrepreneurship support systems be developed within institutions through alumni engagement, incubation centres, and business development programmes to strengthen students' entrepreneurial readiness.
6. Continuous capacity building for lecturers should be prioritized through regular training, industry exposure and professional development programmes to ensure that teaching approaches remain aligned with evolving marketing trends and workplace requirements.

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