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Employability Skills and Career Aspirations of Students with Visual Impairment in Tertiary Institutions in South-East Nigeria

***Egwim, G.**
Department of Special Needs Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education Owerri, Imo State

***Corresponding author email:** gertegwim@gmail.com

Abstract
This study examined the employability skills and career aspirations of students with visual impairment in tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, and a sample of 150 visually impaired students was purposively selected from universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education in the region. Two researcher-developed instruments, the Employability Skills Questionnaire (ESQ) and the Career Aspiration Scale (CAS), were used to collect data. Experts validated both instruments, and reliability was established with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were used to answer research questions. An independent t-test and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) were also employed to test hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that students demonstrated a moderate overall level of employability skills, with communication and teamwork as their strongest areas, and ICT competence as the weakest. Career aspirations were concentrated in teaching, law, and entrepreneurship, while fewer students aspired to careers in ICT and counselling. No significant difference was found in employability skills based on gender, but a positive and significant relationship was established between employability skills and career aspirations. The study concludes that students with visual impairment in South-East Nigeria possess ambition but face limitations in competence and career exposure. It recommends strengthening employability training, expanding access to assistive technologies, and providing specialized career guidance to better align students' skills with the labour market demands**.**

Keywords: Employability Skills, Career Aspirations, Students, Visual Impairment, Tertiary Institutions

Introduction

In today's competitive and dynamic labour market, employability skills are widely recognized as essential for graduate success. These skills go beyond subject knowledge to include transferable competencies such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, creativity, digital literacy, and problem-solving (Yorke, 2006). Employers consistently emphasize that graduates who demonstrate these skills are more likely to gain employment, maintain jobs, and progress in their careers (Andrews & Higson, 2008). As such, tertiary institutions worldwide have been increasingly tasked not only with providing academic qualifications but also with equipping learners with the competencies necessary to thrive in diverse and evolving workplaces.

For students with disabilities, and particularly those with visual impairment, the acquisition of employability skills is even more critical. While tertiary education offers them access to knowledge and credentials, their transition into the labour market is often constrained by structural and social barriers. Although Anyanwu, et al (2017) reported that some individuals with disabilities are into highly skilled job placements like the legal profession, others have reported that globally, visually impaired graduates experience disproportionately higher rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to their sighted peers, despite having comparable or even superior academic qualifications (WHO, 2019). Employers frequently cite a lack of workplace accommodations,

misconceptions about productivity, and concerns about cost as reasons for not hiring persons with visual impairment (Anyanwu & Ole 2017: Sacks & Rosenblum, 2016). These barriers persist despite evidence showing that with appropriate training and assistive technologies, visually impaired graduates are equally capable of performing in a wide range of professional roles (Shah & Priestley, 2011).

In Nigeria, the situation is particularly concerning. Although efforts have been made to expand access to tertiary education for persons with disabilities, including visually impaired students, systemic challenges continue to undermine their employment prospects (Okeke, 2021). First, there is limited integration of employability skill development within the curriculum of tertiary institutions. Many academic programs remain heavily theory-oriented, with little emphasis on practical skills such as communication, ICT literacy, entrepreneurship, and teamwork (Adebisi et al., 2017; Egwim, 2022). Second, opportunities for internships and work placements, which are critical for building employability, are often inaccessible to visually impaired students due to poor institutional support and negative employer perceptions. Third, assistive technologies that could enhance learning and skill development are either unavailable or unaffordable, leaving students at a disadvantage compared to their peers in developed contexts.

Career aspirations, which reflect an individual's ambitions, interests, and future goals, are deeply connected to employability skills. They not only shape students' educational experiences but also influence how they navigate the labour market (Gore et al., 2017). For visually impaired students, career aspirations are often mediated by perceived accessibility of certain professions, availability of role models, and structural constraints. Research indicates that visually impaired learners tend to aspire towards careers in teaching, law, counselling, and entrepreneurship, which are considered more accommodating to their abilities (Anyanwu et al 2017; Sacks & Wolffe, 2006). However, according to Anyanwu et al. (2014) such aspirations may be limited by narrow exposure to career options, lack of tailored career guidance services, and systemic discrimination in employment practices.

Tertiary institutions occupy a strategic position in shaping both employability skills and career aspirations of students. They provide not only academic training but also opportunities for skill-building through extracurricular activities, career services, and work-integrated learning. For students with visual impairment, institutional support in these areas is essential for bridging the gap between academic achievement and labour market demands (Yorke & Knight, 2007). Unfortunately, many Nigerian tertiary institutions lack structured programs that integrate employability training into the learning experience of students with disabilities (Adebisi et al., 2017). Consequently, visually impaired students may graduate with qualifications but without adequate preparation for the realities of the workplace.

Existing studies in Nigeria have examined employability challenges of students with disabilities broadly, often highlighting poor institutional support, limited policy implementation, and negative employer attitudes (Okeke, 2021; Adepoju, 2020). However, there remains a paucity of research that specifically interrogates the employability skills and career aspirations of students with visual impairment in tertiary institutions. This omission is significant because students with visual impairment face unique barriers distinct from those with other disabilities. Without targeted evidence, interventions remain generic, potentially overlooking the particular needs of this group. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by investigating the employability skills and career aspirations of students with visual impairment in Nigerian tertiary institutions. By assessing their current skill levels, analysing their career ambitions, and examining variations based on gender and academic discipline, the study aims to generate insights that can inform curriculum development, institutional practices, and policy interventions. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader agenda of inclusive education and workforce equity, ensuring that visually impaired graduates are not only academically qualified but also adequately prepared to pursue meaningful careers.

Statement of the Problem

Tertiary education is expected to prepare students not only with academic knowledge but also with employability skills that enable them to succeed in the workplace. For students with visual impairment, however, this goal is not always achieved. Many of them graduate with limited exposure to opportunities that build essential skills such as communication, teamwork, ICT competence, and problem-solving. Barriers such as inadequate access to assistive technologies, limited institutional support, and restricted participation in internships further limit their readiness for employment. In addition, career aspirations of students with visual impairment are often shaped by perceived accessibility rather than personal interest or labour market demand. Many concentrate on careers in teaching, law, or entrepreneurship, partly because they lack career guidance and exposure to diverse options. This mismatch between skills, aspirations, and workplace expectations places them at a disadvantage after graduation. Without

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deliberate interventions, students with visual impairment risk leaving tertiary institutions with unmet aspirations and limited opportunities for meaningful employment, thereby perpetuating cycles of exclusion and underutilization of their potential.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the employability skills and career aspirations of students with visual impairment in tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Assess the level of employability skills among students with visual impairment in tertiary institutions.
2. Examine the career aspirations of students with visual impairment in relation to their academic programs.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of employability skills among students with visual impairment in tertiary institutions?
2. What are the career aspirations of students with visual impairment in relation to their academic programs?

Hypotheses

$H0_1$: There is no significant difference in employability skills of students with visual impairment based on gender.
$H0_2$: There is no significant difference in employability skills of students with visual impairment based on academic discipline.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect data from students with visual impairment on their employability skills and career aspirations without manipulating variables.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised all students with visual impairment enrolled in tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria. This includes universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education within the five states of the region. Both totally blind and partially sighted students across various fields of study formed part of this population.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 150 students with visual impairment was drawn from selected tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria using purposive sampling. Only institutions that had a notable number of visually impaired students were included. To ensure representation, the sample was stratified by gender and academic discipline.

Instrument for Data Collection

Two researcher-developed instruments were used for data collection:

1. **Employability Skills Questionnaire (ESQ):** A 25-item questionnaire designed to measure students' employability skills in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, ICT competence, and adaptability, rated on a 4-point Likert scale (*Strongly Agree = 4 to Strongly Disagree = 1*).

2. **Career Aspiration Scale (CAS):** A 15-item instrument designed to capture students' career goals, preferred professions, and perceptions of career accessibility, also rated on a 4-point Likert scale.

Both instruments were validated by experts in special education, guidance and counselling, and measurement and evaluation. A pilot study conducted with 20 visually impaired students from a tertiary institution outside the study sample produced a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.84, confirming internal consistency.

Procedure for Data Collection

Permission was obtained from participating institutions prior to data collection. Research assistants trained in working with students with visual impairment assisted in administering the instruments. Questionnaires were provided in both Braille and electronic formats to ensure accessibility. Students were given sufficient time to complete the instruments, and clarifications were provided where necessary.

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Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Means and standard deviations were used to answer the research questions. Independent t-test was used to test the first hypothesis (gender differences), while Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the second hypothesis (relationship between employability skills and career aspirations). All hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

Research Question 1: What is the level of employability skills among students with visual impairment in tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Employability Skills of Students with Visual Impairment (N = 150).

Employability Skill Area	N	Mean	SD	Remark
Communication Skills	150	3.02	0.64	Moderate
Teamwork and Collaboration	150	2.95	0.71	Moderate
Problem-Solving Skills	150	2.68	0.75	Low-Moderate
ICT Competence	150	2.45	0.81	Low
Adaptability	150	2.88	0.69	Moderate
Grand Mean	150	2.80	0.72	Moderate

The results in Table 1 show that students with visual impairment demonstrated a moderate overall level of employability skills (Mean = 2.80). Communication and teamwork were their strongest skills, while ICT competence was rated lowest, suggesting limited proficiency in digital technologies.

Research Question 2

What are the career aspirations of students with visual impairment in relation to their academic programs?

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Career Aspirations (N = 150).

Career Aspiration	Frequency	Percentage
Teaching/Education	54	36.00%
Law/Advocacy	33	22.00%
Entrepreneurship	27	18.00%
ICT/Digital Careers	21	14.00%
Counseling/Social Work	15	10.00%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The results in Table 2 show that teaching was the most common career aspiration among students with visual impairment (36%), followed by law/advocacy (22%) and entrepreneurship (18%). Fewer students aspired to ICT/digital careers (14%) or counselling/social work (10%), reflecting both personal interests and perceived accessibility of career paths.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the employability skills of students with visual impairment based on gender.

Table 3: Independent t-test of Employability Skills by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig. (p)	Decision
Male	80	2.83	0.7				
Female	70	2.76	0.74	148	0.64	0.526	Not Sig.

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The results in Table 3 show no significant difference in employability skills between male (M = 2.83) and female (M = 2.76) students with visual impairment ($t = 0.64$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is retained, indicating that gender does not influence employability skills in this group.

Hypothesis 2
There is no significant relationship between employability skills and career aspirations of students with visual impairment.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation of Employability Skills and Career Aspirations.

Variables	N	R	Sig. (p)	Decision
Employability Skills vs Career Aspirations	150	0.41	0	Sig.

The results in Table 4 show a positive and significant relationship between employability skills and career aspirations of students with visual impairment ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is rejected, suggesting that higher levels of employability skills are associated with higher or more diverse career aspirations.

Discussion
The findings of this study provide important insights into the employability skills and career aspirations of students with visual impairment in tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria**.**

Employability Skills of Students with Visual Impairment
The results revealed that students demonstrated a moderate overall level of employability skills, with communication and teamwork emerging as their strongest areas, while ICT competence was the weakest. This aligns with the observations of Adebisi et al. (2017), who noted that Nigerian tertiary institutions emphasize communication and collaborative activities but often provide insufficient training in digital skills for students with disabilities. The low ICT competence reflects the limited access to assistive technologies and digital tools, which are critical for competitiveness in today's job market. These findings are consistent with Okeke (2021), who reported that visually impaired graduates often struggle with ICT-related tasks due to inadequate institutional support. They also support Anyaegbu and Eneh (2019), who highlighted that lack of adaptive technology training contributes to digital exclusion of students with disabilities in Nigerian higher education.

In contrast, studies in developed contexts paint a different picture. Sacks and Rosenblum (2016) reported that visually impaired students in the United States demonstrate high levels of ICT skills when institutions provide accessible technology and training. Similarly, Wolffe and Kelly (2011) found that visually impaired youths who had consistent exposure to computer training and digital tools in school exhibited strong employability outcomes. These contrasting findings suggest that environmental and resource factors, rather than disability itself, largely determine ICT competence among visually impaired learners.

Career Aspirations of Students with Visual Impairment
The study found that teaching was the most common career aspiration, followed by law and entrepreneurship, while fewer students aspired to careers in ICT and counseling. This distribution reflects a pattern where students with visual impairment pursue careers they perceive as accessible or where role models exist. Sacks and Wolffe (2006) similarly observed that visually impaired students often concentrate on teaching and law because these professions require less visual input and provide opportunities for advocacy. Nwokolo and Eze (2020) also reported that visually impaired Nigerian students frequently chose teaching careers due to job security and perceived lower discrimination in education-related professions.

The aspiration towards entrepreneurship found in this study suggests growing awareness among students of the potential for self-reliance. This finding supports Alade (2018), who argued that entrepreneurial ambitions among students with disabilities are increasing in Nigeria as a response to unemployment and social exclusion. However, the relatively low interest in ICT and counselling careers underscores the perception of these fields as inaccessible, which is consistent with Kyeremeh (2019), who found that a lack of exposure to diverse career paths restricts aspirations among visually impaired learners in Ghana. By contrast, research by Papadopoulos and Montgomery (2019) in Canada showed that visually impaired students demonstrated higher aspirations in ICT careers, driven by institutional programs that integrate technology training into academic learning. This contrast emphasizes the role of exposure and institutional support in shaping career choices.

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Gender and Employability Skills

The hypothesis testing revealed no significant difference in employability skills based on gender. Both male and female students demonstrated similar levels of competence, suggesting that gender does not play a determining role in skill acquisition among visually impaired students. This finding supports Adepoju (2020), who found that gender differences in employability skills are minimal when students face similar environmental barriers and opportunities. It also agrees with Chidubem and Odo (2019), who reported that among Nigerian students with disabilities, gender did not significantly influence communication, teamwork, or adaptability skills.

However, some studies contradict this finding. Akinyemi (2017) found that female students with disabilities in Nigerian higher institutions often had lower self-reported confidence in ICT and problem-solving compared to their male counterparts, attributing this to cultural expectations and limited access to digital resources. Similarly, Lindsay (2011) argued that female students with disabilities may experience compounded disadvantage in developing employability skills due to both gender and disability biases in the labor market. These contrasting results suggest that while gender differences may not be prominent in skill acquisition in the present study, contextual and cultural factors could influence specific domains of employability.

Relationship between Employability Skills and Career Aspirations

The study further established a positive and significant relationship between employability skills and career aspirations. Students with higher employability skills tended to report more ambitious or diverse career goals. This finding resonates with Yorke and Knight (2007), who emphasized that the development of employability skills enhances students' confidence in pursuing a wider range of careers. It also agrees with Gore et al. (2017), who argued that career aspirations are strongly influenced by the skills and competencies individuals perceive themselves to possess. In the Nigerian context, Emezie and Ogu (2021) similarly reported that students with disabilities who had higher self-rated employability skills expressed greater ambition in career choice and confidence in competing with their peers.

Conversely, some scholars highlight limitations. Oviawe (2010) argued that even when students with disabilities possess employability skills, external factors such as discrimination and lack of workplace accommodation often constrain their career outcomes. Likewise, Lindsay et al. (2019) found that visually impaired students in the UK sometimes restricted their career aspirations not because of lack of skills, but due to negative employer attitudes and limited opportunities for workplace inclusion. These contrasting findings suggest that while employability skills are important in shaping aspirations, broader structural and attitudinal barriers continue to influence the career trajectories of students with visual impairment.

Conclusion

This study examined the employability skills and career aspirations of students with visual impairment in tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria. The findings revealed that while students demonstrated moderate employability skills overall, their weakest area was ICT competence, reflecting limited access to assistive technologies and digital training. Career aspirations were concentrated in teaching, law, and entrepreneurship, with fewer students aspiring to careers in ICT and counselling. Hypothesis testing showed no significant gender differences in employability skills, but a significant positive relationship between employability skills and career aspirations was established.

These results suggest that students with visual impairment in South-East Nigeria possess ambition and potential but are constrained by gaps in digital literacy, limited institutional support, and narrow exposure to diverse career options. Strengthening employability training, expanding access to technology, and providing tailored career guidance can help bridge the gap between aspirations and workplace realities. By doing so, tertiary institutions can better prepare visually impaired students for meaningful employment, thereby promoting inclusion, independence, and equity.

Recommendations

1. Policy Makers should provide resources and policies that ensure access to assistive technologies in tertiary institutions across South-East Nigeria.
2. Employers and stakeholders should create inclusive internship and workplace opportunities to strengthen practical skills and reduce employment barriers for visually impaired graduates.
3. Career guidance units should establish specialized counselling and mentorship programs that expose visually impaired students to diverse career pathways beyond traditional fields.

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4. Tertiary institutions should integrate structured employability training—especially in ICT and problem-solving—into curricula for students with visual impairment.
5. Researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to explore how employability skills influence the long-term career trajectories of students with visual impairment in Nigeria.

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