

*Perceived Skills Development Acquisition Needs of Agricultural Students in
Public Colleges of Education in Kwara State, Nigeria*

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Abstract

The concept of skills acquisition is a global concept that needs to be embraced at all levels of human endeavor given this, the study was set to investigate the perceived indices for skills development acquisition needed among NCE agricultural undergraduate students in public colleges of Education in Kwara state, Nigeria. The sample size comprises all the NCE students in all three colleges of education in Kwara state, the sample frame of 35% of the respondents was used making a total of 150 respondents used as the sample size. The multi-stage sampling procedure was adapted, Instrument for data collection was a questionnaire, while descriptive & inferential statistical tools were used for data analysis. Results of the findings revealed that the majority of the respondents (92.7%) could communicate adequately, (92%) had a good sense of human relationships, (92.5%) possessed the ability to cope with academic stress, (87.5%) possessed the ability to adopt innovation while 89.6% possessed a problem-solving strategies skills, The results also affirm that NCE agriculture students required more skills development; in some of the areas like innovative skills acquisition (=3.50), & e-skills acquisition (=3.47) among others. It therefore recommended that the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) extend its internship training program on skills acquisition to 6months instead of 4 months, which will enable agriculture students to fully acquire necessary skills acquisition that are relevant to the establishment & sustainability of agro-based enterprises.

Keywords: Skills Development, Students, Needs, Colleges of Education

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Introduction

Skill acquisition can be defined as the process of learning to do something to earn a living & support one's livelihood. Skills can be acquired from various sources, depending on the type of skills; however, the environment plays a significant role in enhancing the development of proper and adequate skills. According to Oluwaseun (2023), the development of soft skills has become a central focus of job occupations, with the potential to engage more than two-thirds of all NCE graduate job seekers by 2030, as reported by Ademola (2022). Soft skills have increasingly become essential for a successful professional career and have gained attention in social media, among employers, and legislators in recent years (Youth Employment Funders Group, 2023). There is a large number of NCE agriculture graduates seeking employers and lawmakers in recent years (Youth Employment Funders Group, 2023). Currently, a large number of NCE agriculture graduates are seeking employment in the agriculture industry, increasing competition to secure and retain employment. However, in Nigeria, studies have shown that the majority of entry-level NCE agriculture graduates are not adequately equipped with the relevant skills required by the industry, suggesting that many of them lack marketable skills and have difficulty finding quality jobs in the industry (Oluwadamilola & Babajide, 2024).

Many issues currently hinder the agricultural industry, with the workforce predominantly composed of elderly individuals, while youth involvement in acquiring soft skills remains low (Umar et al., 2024). Some reasons for this challenging situation among NCE agriculture graduates include a lack of interest in the profession, inappropriate curriculum design, insufficient funding, an unfriendly environment, inadequate teaching staff, modern facilities, a shortage of qualified personnel, and an over-reliance on theoretical content teaching with little practical application (Ogunlade & Ige, 2023). As a result, students are unable to develop practical skills that would allow them to demonstrate their full potential and gain a competitive advantage in society (Okonkwo & Olugbenga, 2023). These soft skills gaps have hindered agricultural progress due to insufficient skills, which underscores the need for students to be aware of and prepared for future job challenges.

Research has shown that many NCE graduates fail to meet the demands of the global labor force. This failure is often attributed to the misconception that white-collar jobs are a guaranteed safety net in a changing economy, focusing only on theoretical skills & disregarding the importance of acquiring practical skills. The emphasis should be on practical learning to enable students to acquire the skills needed for future job opportunities and enhance their ability to effectively communicate and apply technical and vocational knowledge across industries. Therefore, students need to prepare for the future and acquire soft skills that will enhance their employability and help them succeed in their chosen careers. Agriculture students in particular need to understand and master these soft skills to prepare for the global job market. Although several studies have explored the soft skills of university students, few studies have specifically examined agriculture students in public universities of education in Kwara State, Nigeria. This study aims to fill this gap in the existing literature.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the perceived soft skills needs of agricultural students in public colleges of education in Kwara State, Nigeria. In particular, the study aims to:

1. Identify the types of soft skills that agricultural students in NCE schools consider necessary.

2. Determine the soft skills needs in three colleges of education in Kwara State.
3. Identify and rank the perceived constraints associated with soft skills acquisition.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Kwara State, Nigeria. The state was created on May 2nd, 1967, and is predominantly agricultural, covering an area of about 60,388 square kilometers. According to the 2006 population census, Kwara State has a population of approximately 3.5 million people, divided into sixteen local government areas. Kwara State's rainfall patterns are favorable for the cultivation of crops such as yam, maize, tomatoes, okra, pepper, & amaranth. The state experiences two growing seasons, from April to July and September to November, with an annual rainfall of about 800mm & 1500mm, respectively.

Kwara State is known for its educational institutions, with three public colleges of education: College of Education, Oro (established in 1976), Kwara State College of Education (Technical), Lafiagi (established in 1991), and Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin (originally established in 1976 and later renamed). These institutions offer agricultural programs designed to equip students with soft skills to complement their professional careers.

Sampling & Sample Techniques

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed to select the desired sample. The first stage involved the purposive selection of three public colleges of education in Kwara State: COED Ilorin, COED Oro, & COED Lafiagi. The second stage involved categorizing the students based on their academic levels in each selected college. The third stage entailed the random selection of 50 NCE agriculture undergraduate students from each of the three colleges, totaling 150 students.

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire titled "Perceived Soft Skills Needs of Agriculture Students in Public Colleges of Education in Kwara State." All 150 distributed questionnaires were retrieved & deemed useful for analysis. To analyze the first research question, descriptive statistics were employed. For the second research objective, descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were calculated for each variable using a four-point Likert scale: "never" (4 points), "rarely" (3 points), "often" (2 points), & "always" (1 point). A cutoff mean of 2.50 was set such that skill acquisition with a mean of 2.50 or above was considered necessary or present, while skills with a mean of less than 2.50 were considered unnecessary or non-existent. For the third objective, means & standard deviations were calculated for all factors using the same Likert scale, with a cutoff mean of 2.50 indicating serious limitations in skill acquisition.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Perceived Types of Soft Skills Possessed by Agriculture Students in Colleges of Education in Kwara State

Soft Skills Possessed	Percentage
Effective communication	97.2
A good sense of humor	96.0
How to deal with academic stress	95.0
Ability to access information online	95.6
Ability to complete obligations by deadlines	92.0
Problem-solving strategies	89.6
Ability to develop alternative solutions	89.4
Ability to work independently	88.4
Ability to start livestock farming with minimal supervision	88.0
Ability to coordinate & manage the affairs of others	92.5
Ability to develop ideas for implementation	87.1
Ability to judge situations	88.3
Ability to work under pressure	84.7
Ability to read & write	83.9
Has certain cognitive abilities	80.7
Multiple answers were recorded	

Source: Field survey, 2024

Perceived Types of Soft Skills Possessed by Agriculture Students

According to the findings in Table 1, the respondents demonstrated proficiency in fifteen (15) identified types of soft skills. The majority of respondents (97.2%) reported being able to communicate effectively, 96% had a good sense of humor, 95.0% exhibited coping strategies against academic stress, 95.6% could source information online, 92% had problem-solving strategies, and 89.6% had problem-solving skills. Additionally, 88.4% could work independently, 88% exhibited teamwork skills, and 87.1% could initiate animal husbandry with minimal supervision. Other notable skills included innovative skills (84.7%), the ability to coordinate and handle others' affairs (83.9%), idea generation (83.1%), evaluating circumstances (83.1%), and the ability to work under pressure (80.7%).

These findings align with those of Adedayo (2023), who found that Nigerian university students possess communication skills, time management skills, creativity, leadership, and interpersonal skills. Additionally, these results corroborate the findings of Anjola and Aderemi (2024), who reported that Nigerian agriculture students possess essential skills like communication, leadership, time management, and work ethics. This implies that respondents are adequately developing the soft skills necessary to be prepared for future employment opportunities.

Table 2: Perceived Types of Soft Skills Needed by Agriculture Students in Colleges of Education

Types of Soft Skills Needed	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
Creative thinking skills	3.51*	2.08	1 st
Team works skills	3.50*	2.06	2 nd
Problem-solving/decision-making skills	3.48*	2.04	3 rd
Leadership/management skills	3.47*	2.02	4 th
Digital skills	3.44*	2.04	5 th
Communication skills	3.42*	2.06	6 th
Adaptability skills	3.39*	2.10	7 th
Critical thinking skills	3.38*	2.11	8 th
Time management skills	3.36*	2.12	9 th
Interpersonal skills	3.27*	2.11	10 th

Source: Field survey, 2024

Perceived Types of Soft Skills Needed by Agriculture Students

The results in Table 2 show the types of soft skills required by agricultural students in colleges of education in Kwara State. In the list of soft skills required by agricultural students, creative thinking skills topped the list with a mean of 3.51 (SD=2.08), followed by skills in the cognitive domain. The average of all the soft skills indicates that university students need all these skills as all soft skills achieved a mean score above the cut-off mean of 2.50. However, the different standard deviations indicate different levels of agreement among the respondents. The standard deviations for skills such as creativity & teamwork are relatively low indicating a high level of agreement among the respondents, while the standard deviations for skills such as critical thinking and time management are high indicating differences of opinion.

This is in line with the findings of Oluwalola (2024), who found that students need various soft skills, including teamwork, communication, leadership, time management, problem solving, and analytical skills. These findings are consistent with those of Sacpudim and colleagues (2024), who highlighted the importance of communication, teamwork, and decision-making skills among university students. Furthermore, the results of this study support the findings of Sarker and colleagues (2024), who stated that students need essential soft skills such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. Sharma and Dayanand (2024) also argue that soft skills are essential for students as they facilitate exploration of their environment and improve employability.

Furthermore, these results support the conclusions of Murugan and colleagues (2024) on the importance of communication, decision-making, work ethics, problem-solving, time management skills and other soft skills. These results are also in line with Oviawes (2024) who agree that college students should have soft skills such as communication, creative thinking, critical thinking and collaboration/team skills.

Table 3: Constraints Faced to Skills Acquisition Through ICT Usage by Respondent

Constraints	Mean	Ranking
Inadequate financial capacity	1.76	7 th
Poor electricity	2.74	4 th
Poor technical know-how	1.68	8 th
Poor interest in agriculture	2.39	5 th
Inadequate availability of internet	1.77	6 th
High cost of e-skills	2.80	3 rd
Inadequate provision of necessary skills required	3.46	1 st
Poor training on soft skills acquired	1.68	8 th
High cost of training Equipment	3.05	2 nd

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Constraints to ICT Usage by Respondents

Table 3 reveals that inadequate provision of necessary skills required (3.46), next is inadequate financial support (3.05), high cost of e-skills (2.80), poor electricity (2.74), & poor interest in agriculture (2.39) were major constraints affecting respondents' acquiring necessary soft skills acquisition. This is in line with Bamiwuye and colleagues (2024), who carried out work on ICT, highlighting the high cost of acquiring ICT equipment, slow internet access speed, poor access to ICT facilities in the library, and irregular power supply as major constraints. This result also brings to the fore that the government should make available all the necessary equipment & information & communication sector regulators, such as Nigerian Communications Commission Education (NCC E), should ensure better system linkage.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Agricultural students in Kwara State Normal Schools understand the importance of acquiring soft skills. These students possess a range of soft skills, including communication, adaptability, cognitive domain skills, teamwork, ability to manage academic stress, ability to work independently, leadership, critical thinking and creative problem solving. Among these soft skills, the most essential for students are creative thinking, cognitive domain skills, problem solving and decision-making, leadership and management, digital literacy, communication, adaptability, critical thinking and time management. In contrast, interpersonal skills are considered less vital.

The college management committee (CMC), working with the government, should try to expose students to more internship training and lengthen the duration. This could include conferences, seminars, and workshops that help students learn more soft skills. To enable NCE students completely understand professional soft skills including cooperation, creative thinking, time management, timeliness, and effective communication, the government should set up 6-month internship programs. Group dynamics, including interactions between students and between students and teachers in problem-based courses, should be used to help students develop their skills. Among other things, these programs will greatly improve their communication and leadership abilities.

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