*Factors Influencing Faculty Willingness to Engage in Academic Service-Learning Approach With Businesses for Graduates Employability Skills Development: Benin Perspectives*

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**Abstract**
Graduates from all over the world face a labour market completely transformed by dynamic changes. Indeed, employers nowadays are hiring employees with employability skills, thus forcing universities to produce graduates who ideally respond to their needs. Faced with this pressure, universities are required to engage with businesses to develop teaching methods that foster employability skills. Several scholars view academic service learning as the required pedagogy for universities to achieve such an objective. Whilst service-learning implementation is known with public institutions and non-governmental organizations, little research has been done on its application with businesses. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the factors influencing faculty willingness to engage in such an approach with community-based businesses in Africa, especially in the Benin Republic. This study adopts a sequential mixed method. A focus group discussion was conducted with ten faculty and the results were extended with a quantitative method. Findings indicate that faculty competencies in service learning, and resources support positively influence the willingness of faculty to implement such an approach while organizational support and business engagement show a negative effect.


Keywords: Academic Service Learning, Innovative Teaching Method, Employability Skills, Soft Skills, Businesses, Community-Based Businesses

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**Introduction**

Labour market is perceived by Rakowska & Juana-Espinosa (2021) as a social context in which the interaction between the labour supply and labour demand is observed. Labour supply representing employees produced by universities and demand representing employers and therefore businesses. Nowadays, such social contexts around the world are undergoing dynamic changes which call for novel qualifications, skills and abilities. According to Bhorat, Goga, & Stanwix, (2013), several factors such as globalization and technological changes explain these shifts. Globalisation and technological changes that generate new types of environmental collaboration, thus driving companies through a form of revolution. As a result, the world is witnessing the creation of new job opportunities but also difficulties for actors in the labour markets (Rakowska & Juana-Espinosa, 2021). A new working context demands new strategies to prepare graduates to access and move effectively within labour markets. This requires young generations to develop their employability skills i.e. soft skills in order to access employment. The latter consists according to Igwe, Lock, & Rugara (2020) of "the knowledge, skills and attributes that graduates are expected to demonstrate to have acquired". The World Economic Forum (2016) pointed out ten skills required for graduates to thrive and succeed in the future workplace. This includes among others complex problem-solving skills, creativity, critical thinking, resource management, and coordinating with others. These are flexible skills that enable one to perform and progress in a job environment. The question is whether higher education institutions (HEIs) are ready to engage in the change by developing these various skills among their graduates (Rakowska & Juana-Espinosa, 2021). This appears even an issue in African countries such as the Benin Republic where there is a rapidly growing young population but the quality of education is still low (Rakowska & Juana-Espinosa, 2021). A number of studies have shown that universities in Benin are failing to develop graduates that meet the labour market needs, thus raising a debate on the nature of educational programs and their capacity to enhance graduates' employability (Igwe, Lock, & Rugara, 2020). According to Okolie & Mlanga (2019), most universities predominantly use the traditional teaching approach, which unfortunately offers no opportunities for soft skills development and mastery. The logic of the Education system as highlighted by Dewey (1986) should be reversed from a one-way teaching approach to an experiential method. An experiential method in which learners are the centre and actors of their own learning construction. To achieve this, Guàrdia, Mancini, Jacobetty, & Maina (2021) recommends universities engage in collaboration with businesses through a novel teaching approach such as academic service learning (ASL). Wijayanama, Ranjani, & Devadas (2020) defined service learning as a teaching and learning method that involves three components:

a) A service activity tied to an academic curriculum.
b) that meet a community partner's needs; and
c) provide time for critical and intensive reflection activities.

It is a process whereby students' learning is extended beyond the classroom boundaries to enable them to apply their knowledge and theories to real-life problem-solving situations. In doing so, they gain a better understanding of their course contents and develop various skills and abilities, including the employability skills required in the workplace. According to Simola (2009), academic service learning is an effective and viable teaching approach that allows the transformation of learners and its application with community-based businesses enables them to conduct and manage real business projects. However, academic service learning for decades has been touted as a pedagogy that solely involves collaboration

between universities and non-profit organizations. Little research has been conducted on its implementation with community-based businesses. In addition, since ASL implementation involves a revision of the curriculum, which falls under faculty responsibility, Bringle & Hatcher (1995) emphasized that their willingness to engage in is crucial for its success. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the factors influencing faculty willingness to engage in ASL with community-based businesses in the Benin Republic.

**Academic Service Learning and Employability Skills**

Academic service-learning rooted in experiential education is perceived as a pedagogy that combines students' academic learning with service activities in a community-based business setting with structured time for intensive reflection. Prior research emphasized the numerous benefits of academic service learning on students' development (e.g. Heffernan, 2001; Wijayanama, Ranjani, & Devadas, 2020; Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007 etc…). This session addresses how academic service learning with businesses enhances work readiness. While career preparation is not the primary concern of academic service learning, Mtawa, Fongwa, & Wilson-Strydom (2019) found its relevance to enable graduates' employability skills development. For instance, Tumuti, Mule, Gecaga, & Manguriu (2013) identified after completing a service learning project with the private sector a range of soft skills such as communication, initiative, networking, teamwork, problem-solving, etc among students of Kenyatta University. Additionally, Black (2002) found academic service learning with businesses relevant to enable students to understand the variety of challenges related to the current uncertain business world. Furthermore, academic service learning with businesses allows students ethical development (Black, 2002). According to Matthews, Dorfman, & Wu (2015), academic service learning enhances graduates' critical thinking, leadership, and adaptation skills. Pena (2020) pointed out that these soft skills are extremely important and top the list of qualities needed in the workplace. Woefully, universities seem to struggle in developing such skills through a traditional teaching method (Pacho, 2019). Facing the 21st-century challenges, Tumuti, Mule, Gecaga, & Manguriu (2013) challenged African universities to proceed with a strategic adaptation that reflects the employability skills discourse through academic service learning implementation with businesses.

**Research Methodology**

The current paper presents the results of a sequential mixed methodological approach. An exploratory phase was conducted using a qualitative approach with ten (10) faculty as respondents. Respondents were drawn from three different universities and the sampling was snowballing. The objective of this qualitative data collection was to identify the key factors that influence faculty willingness to engage in academic service learning with businesses in the Benin Republic. The data were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher proceeded afterwards to a thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) guidelines. The results were used thereafter to assess faculty in Benin Republic using a quantitative approach. The instrument was a 1-5 Likert survey questionnaire. A pilot test was conducted and the instrument was adjusted based on reviews/comments and submitted afterwards to respondents. The respondents were hundred fifty (150) teaching faculty in total and the sampling was purposive. The assessment was conducted using soft and hard survey instruments. After the data collection, validity and reliability tests, as well as hypotheses testing using multiple regression analysis, were carried out to draw conclusions in the study. The various results are presented in the session below.

**Results and Discussion**

The current study generated primary data using a mixed research methodology. The results from the qualitative approach revealed seven themes meaning the factors that influence faculty willingness. These factors include the four competencies required for faculty to implement service-learning pedagogy meaning personal and interpersonal competencies, social competencies, pedagogical competencies, and reflective competencies. Additionally, the findings revealed institutional support, business engagement, and government support as factors influencing faculty willingness. These factors incorporated 26 items in total. The researcher proceeded to the assessment of respondents using the seven factors meaning constructs with the 26 indicators. The statistical results of the analysis are as follows.

**1. Validity Test**

The validity test was conducted after the data collection using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The factor analysis followed Taherdoost, Sahibuddin, & Jalaliyoon's (2022) five steps guidelines including the evaluation of data suitability for EFA, factor extraction method, factor retention method, selection of rotational method, interpretation and labelling. The results showed a Kaiser-Meyer- Olkin (KMO) range of 0.804 which is above the 0.70 value suggested by (Taherdoost, Sahibuddin, & Jalaliyoon, 2022). Besides the KMO results, the study tested the correlation among items using Bartlett's test of sphericity and the matrix exhibited a Chi-Square value of 1600.103 with Sig = 0.000 meaning $p < 0.50$. This indicated then a significant correlation between items and the results is suitable for EFA analysis. The researcher continued the EFA process and proceeded to four (4) iterations especially cross-loaded items and items with no minimum of 0.50 factor loading. At the end, five (5) factors were retained in the process. The first factor (F1) in the matrix represents service-learning competencies (SLC) which include the four competencies loaded together as one factor. The second factor (F2) represents resource support (RS) which incorporated some items of institutional support. The third factor (F3) involves the dependent variable faculty willingness (FW), and the fourth factor (F4) involves organizational support (OS) which incorporated another set of items that were under institutional support. For the ease of readers, the initial construct named institutional support was divided in the EFA matrix into two different constructs or factors which represent resource support and organizational support. Besides, the last factor (F5) observed in the matrix is business engagement (BE). Table 1 displays the EFA results.

| Items | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SLC (F1)** | | | | | |
| Development of learners. | .928 | | | | |
| Being able to implement educational learning. | .850 | | | | |
| Evaluation of learning outcomes | .801 | | | | |
| Ability to communicate or interact effectively with others for SL success. | .723 | | | | |
| Ability to enhance the mental activities on students to enable their development. | .677 | | | | |
| Collaborate or work with others and in teams. | .591 | | | | |
| Being a role model or guide for students. | .533 | | | | |
| Planning/organizing activities | .485 | | | .308 | |
| **RS (F2)** | | | | | |
| Financial support | | .898 | | | |
| Logistical support | | .845 | | | |
| Material support | | .749 | | | |
| Faculty Training | | .549 | | | |
| **FW (F3) Dependent Variable** | | | | | |
| **Willingness to engage in SL.** | | | **.896** | | |
| **SL Effectiveness** | | | **.740** | | |
| **Positive Perception of its Implementation with Businesses** | | | **.647** | | |
| **Willingness to Improve** | | | **.623** | | |
| **OS (F4)** | | | | | |
| Support in SL curricula development | | | | .838 | .303 |
| University support in collaboration establishment | | | | .825 | |
| Provide autonomy for faculty | | | | .555 | |
| **BE (F5)** | | | | | |
| Business Availability | | | | | .835 |
| Business Commitment | | | | | .828 |
| Business non-Reluctance to exchange internal Information | | | | | .529 |

Source: Survey Data (2022)

Table 1: EFA results

These results show that the matrix retained in total five (5) constructs with twenty-two items. Specifically, F1, F2, F4 and F5 represent the independent variable while F3 represents the dependent variable of the study. In the table, the item "planning/organizing activities" was retained because the item was slightly loaded with the minimum requirement. In addition, the table observed some cross-loading, but these items were retained in the process since the table exhibited the maximum factor results. The research model based on the EFA results is presented as follows.
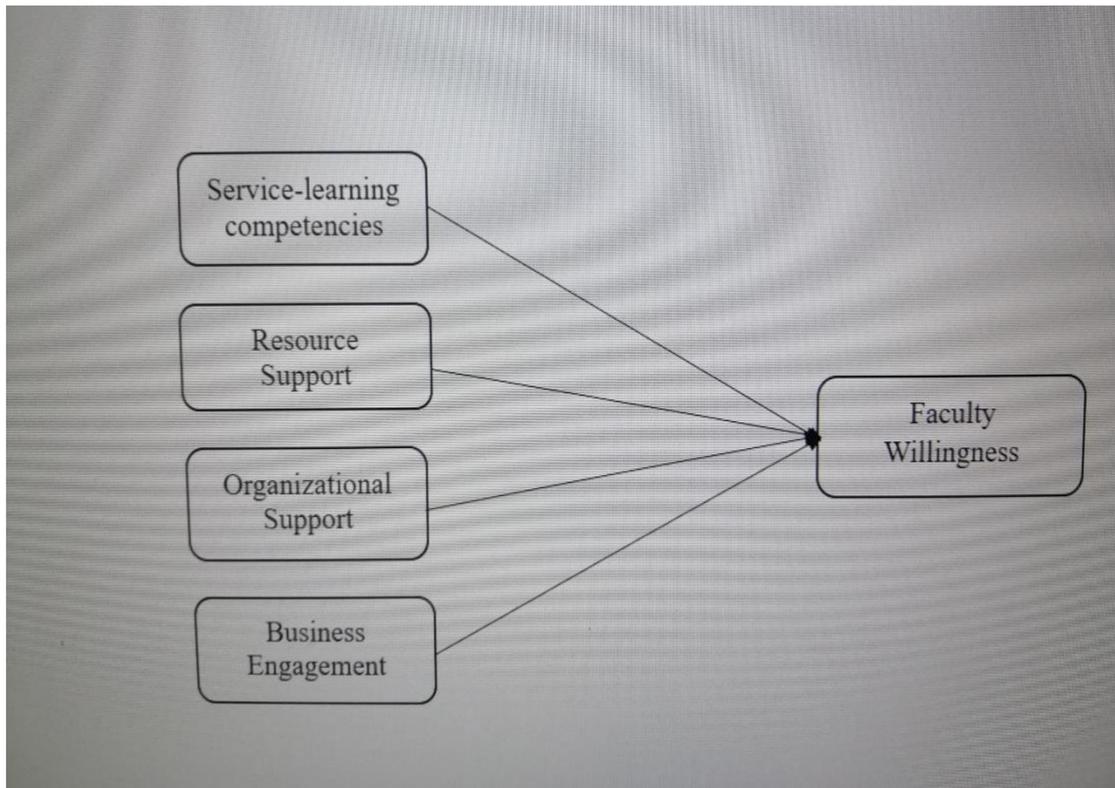
Figure 1: Research Model

The research hypotheses are as follows:

> H1: There is a significant positive relationship between SLC and FW.
> H2: There is a significant positive relationship between RS and FW.
> H3: There is a significant positive relationship between OS and FW.
> H4: There is a significant positive relationship between BE and FW.

Before testing these various hypotheses, the study first assesses the reliability of each construct.

## 2. Reliability Test

After testing the validity using EFA, the study tested the reliability of each construct using Cronbach's Alpha value. In the process, we eliminated items whose presence reduced the Cronbach's Alpha value. Thus, the item "business non-reluctance to exchange internal information" was eliminated to improve the value of its construct business engagement (BE). The results of the reliability test show that all constructs present a Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.60 except the construct BE which presents a value of 0.66. This implies that all constructs under study were reliable. The complete results are presented in the table below.

| Constructs | Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items |
|---|---|
| Faculty Willingness (Dependent variable) | 0.766 |
| Service-learning Competencies | 0.883 |
| Resources Support | 0.792 |
| Organizational Support | 0.718 |
| Business Engagement | 0.668 |

Source: Survey Data (2022)

Table 2. Results of the Reliability Test

Table 2 suggests that all constructs are reliable. The study tests then the various hypotheses under study using multiple regression analysis.

## 3. Multiple Regression Analysis

The study conducts a multiple regression analysis to test the influence of the independent variables including service-learning competencies, resource support, organizational support and business engagement on the dependent variable faculty willingness as suggested in the hypotheses. The table below presents the results of the regression.

| Independent Variables | Dependent Variable | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Service-learning competencies | Faculty Willingness | 7.131 | 0.000 |
| Resource support | | 3.831 | 0.000 |
| Organizational support | | -0.623 | 0.534 |
| Business Engagement | | -2.076 | 0.040 |
| $R^2$ Value | | | 0.422 |
| F | | | 26.420 |
| Sig F | | | 0.000 |

Source: Survey Data (2022)

Table 3: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

The results of the multiple regression analysis showed that the $R^2$ Value was 0.422, which indicated that 42% variable in the dependent variable meaning FW can be explained by variations from all four independent variables under study while the remaining 57.8% is explained by other factors outside the model. The table showed an F value of 26.420 with a p-value = 0.000 (p< 0.05) which is significant. The t-test results revealed that not all independent variables had a significant value of below 0.05 and a positive effect on the dependent variable. Specifically, the constructs business engagement and organizational support were found not to have a positive and statistical effect on faculty willingness. Even though the construct business engagement had a p-value of 0.040 which is below 0.05, the t-value was negative. This means that both $H_3$ and $H_4$ were rejected. Meanwhile, the two other independent variables (Service-learning competencies, and resource support) were statistically proven to have a positive influence on faculty willingness with significant p-values below 0.05. The findings in this study show that service-learning competencies (SLC), and resource support (RS), were significant contributors to Faculty willingness (FW), while organizational support (OS) and business engagement (BE) had a negative effect on faculty willingness. This study attempted to analyze the influence of service-learning competencies, resource support, organizational support, and business engagement on faculty willingness. The results of the positive influence of SLC on faculty willingness support prior research

such as Smith (2008) who found that faculty show their interest meaning their willingness to service learning approach when they have the related capabilities or competencies. This is explained by the relevance of faculty capabilities in the introduction of a new teaching method. Indeed, introducing a change in the educational arena requires that faculty possess the competencies to effectively engage in the change. It determines whether the change will be successful or not and their willingness stems from their confidence in their ability to perform the approach. While assessing their competencies to perform ASL with businesses, the study revealed a variation in the results. However, all scores were positive meaning that faculty in Benin perceived that they possess the related competencies for ASL implementation. This might reflect an overestimation of faculty in terms of ASL competencies.

Therefore, the study suggests that universities in Benin in attempting to introduce ASL pedagogy may engage in faculty training to strengthen their competencies and enhance as well their willingness to the approach. The study also supports Bringle & Hatcher (1996), who found the relevance of resource support in enhancing faculty motivation and commitment to ASL approach. Indeed, faculty are committed to a new teaching approach when convinced that significant resources are made available for its effectiveness and sustainability. In this study, resource support was measured through financial support, material support, logistical support and faculty training. These supports appear important in any new teaching approach introduction but even more so in ASL with businesses. Providing these supports prevents faculty from resisting the change and allows them as well to effectively perform the due tasks with interest and enthusiasm. As Fullan (2007) mentioned in his change management theory, resources are required for any change introduction in educational settings. Hence, the finding suggests that universities provide the required resources to faculty while introducing SL to enhance their commitment and enable them to succeed and sustain the approach. Another findings of this study show that organizational support and business engagement had a negative effect on faculty willingness. Organizational support was measured in this study through three indicators including university support in SL curricula development, university support in collaboration establishment, and providing autonomy for faculty. The negative effect of the construct can be explained by the fact that such support may not be a necessary condition for faculty willingness. In other words, the lack of organizational support is not a barrier for faculty in Benin to engage in SL, unlike resource support which was seen as a necessary condition for their willingness. Resource support was measured using components which were perceived as indispensable for SL success. Whether they are provided with organizational support or not, they can develop by themselves SL curricula since this falls normally under their responsibility. In addition, they didn't perceive the need for a new collaboration establishment since evaluated faculty works in universities that already have ongoing institutional partnerships with businesses. In this sense, with organizational support or not faculty willingness to engage in ASL will remain. Although this finding revealed a negative effect, the study suggests universities provide organizational support to ease faculty from the heavy load related to ASL implementation and strengthen their willingness. This may improve their performance and thus the success of the approach. The finding also showed a negative effect of business engagement. In the study, faculty assessed business engagement from their perspectives, this means that the more willing faculty are to implement SL, they are sceptical about business engagement in the country. Even though the p Value is significant, the coefficient is negative meaning that an increase in faculty willingness results in a decrease in business engagement from respondents' perspectives. This might be explained by the fact that faculty noticed in their current partnership with businesses no significant engagement from their side. This is supports by

Hamann & Acutt (2003) who highlighted the lack of motivation or engagement from businesses for partnerships in Africa. The study suggests in this sense that universities in the Benin Republic engage in business awareness programs to enhance their motivation. In addition, the government may put in place policy-related programs in order to promote university-business collaboration in the Benin Republic.

**Conclusion**

This study attempts to investigate the factors influencing faculty willingness to engage in ASL with businesses in Benin. After testing the various hypotheses using multiple regression analysis, the key findings revealed that service learning competencies and resource support had a positive and significant effect on faculty willingness while organizational support and business engagement had a negative effect. Based on the findings, the study suggests that universities in Benin provide faculty with resources and training in academic service learning implementation to strengthen their competencies, thus enabling the success of the approach. Although organizational support and business engagement exhibited insignificant results, these factors should not be neglected. Universities are required to provide organizational support to enhance teaching faculty motivation and engage as well in business awareness for effective and sustainable service-learning programs in the country. In terms of limitations, the sample size in this study is relatively small. Only ten (10) faculty were interviewed during the qualitative data collection and the quantitative step was conducted with only hundred fifty faculty. This means that the final results of the study can not be generalized to the whole population. Therefore, the study recommends further research to replicate the research with a large sample size in order to generalize the results.

**Acknowledgements**

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