JOURNAL OF OCCUPATION AND TRAINING
FACULTY OF VOCATIONAL AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION
ALVAN IKOKU FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, OWERRI
VOL. 10 NO. 1 ISSN:2354-2756 SEPTEMBER , 2026

ENHANCING SCHOOL-INDUSTRY COLLABORATION FOR BRIDGING EMPLOYABILITY SKILL GAPS AMONG TVET STUDENTS IN IMO STATE

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Abstract

This study focused on enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. The study adopted a survey research design. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the study and were tested at 0.05 level of significance. The population of the study comprised 157 respondents, consisting of TVET lecturers in public institutions offering TVET programmes and human resource development managers from 56 functional industries in Imo State (101 respondents from institutions and 56 from industries). No sampling technique was employed because the population size was manageable. A structured questionnaire containing 18 items was used as the instrument for data collection. The instrument was validated by three experts, while the reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient method, which yielded a reliability index of 0.76. Out of the 157 copies of questionnaire distributed, 139 copies were successfully retrieved, representing an 88.54% return rate. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the research questions, while t-test statistics were used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance using SPSS. The findings of the study revealed that aligning skill training programmes with institutional academic calendars, granting students regular industrial visits, involving industry personnel in special lectures and seminars, reducing the gap between theoretical and practical learning, and strengthening collaboration between schools and industries through periodic meetings on technological innovations were effective strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration in bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. Based on the findings, the study recommended that industries should recognize the importance of active collaboration with institutions through SIWES and industrial exposure programmes to improve students' employability skills, while institutions should maintain effective communication and sustained partnerships with industries to ensure relevant skill acquisition among TVET students.

***Keywords**: School-Industry Collaboration, Employability Skill, TVET Students.*

Introduction

Youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistent development challenges in Nigeria, driven in large part by gaps between the skills TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) graduates possess and the competencies employers demand. Multiple national and international studies show that employers increasingly seek not only technical know-how but also transferable employability skills which includes problem solving, digital literacy, communication, teamwork, and adaptability, yet many TVET programs continue to emphasize theoretical content and outdated practical tasks (World Bank, 2019; ILO, 2020).

In Imo State, as in other subnational contexts, this mismatch weakens graduate transitions into decent work, constrains firm productivity, and reduces the return on public and private investments in vocational education. Bridging this employability gap requires purposeful, sustained school-industry collaboration that aligns TVET curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment with real labour market needs. School-industry collaboration describes a range of formal and informal arrangements including; industry internships and apprenticeships, work-based learning, employer advisory boards, equipment donations, co-designed curricula, guest lectures, and joint assessment through which employers, training providers, and other stakeholders co-produce relevant learning experiences (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2018; Ghorpade et al., 2021). Evidence from low- and middle-income countries indicates that such partnerships improve graduates' job readiness and employment prospects when they are structured, sustained, and linked to clear competency frameworks (Kluve et al., 2019; Card et al., 2021). Several interrelated variables shape the effectiveness of school-industry collaboration in closing employability gaps among TVET students:

Employability skills: The targeted mix of technical competencies (occupation-specific tasks, digital tool use) and transversal skills (critical thinking, communication, teamwork, self-management) that employers prioritize. Local labour market scans in Nigeria emphasize rising demand for digital and soft skills alongside foundational trade skills (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Adeniyi & Oke, 2023).

Collaboration mechanisms: The specific forms of engagement; internships, apprenticeship schemes, co-curriculum development, guest instruction, shared facilities, and assessment partnerships determine how workplace practices are translated into learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2020). The quality, duration, and supervision of workplace placements are critical moderators of learning outcomes (Kuczera & Field, 2018).

Curriculum and pedagogy: Competency-based curricula, work-simulated labs, project-based learning, and assessment that emphasize demonstration of skills rather than rote knowledge are more likely to produce employable graduates. Institutional adoption of competency frameworks and modular credentials facilitates alignment with employer needs (ILO, 2021).

Institutional capacity and incentives: TVET institutions' leadership, teacher expertise, infrastructure, and governance arrangements influence their ability to manage partnerships. Equally, firms' capacity to host trainees, provide mentoring, and invest time and equipment affects partnership quality. Public incentives and regulatory frameworks can encourage or constrain engagement (World Bank, 2020).

Labour market signals and industry heterogeneity: Demand for skills varies across sectors (manufacturing, agri-processing, ICT, services) and firm sizes. Effective collaboration requires localized labour market information (LMI) to prioritize high-value skills and adjust provision as market signals evolve (ILO, 2022).

Outcomes and measurement: Employment rates, job quality (wages, contract type), self-employment, and demonstrable competence (certification, employer satisfaction) are necessary indicators to assess whether collaboration has reduced the employability gap.

Monitoring and feedback loops between employers and institutions enable continuous improvement.

In Imo State, opportunities exist to deepen collaboration: the state hosts manufacturing, agro-processing, and services firms with potentials to provide realistic workplaces and mentorship; tertiary TVET programs already cover areas such as industrial technology, agricultural education, computer education, and business education. However, obstacles persist leading to weak links between industry and institutions, misaligned curricula, insufficient workplace learning slots, limited teacher industrial experience, and uneven policy implementation that reduce the effectiveness of training in producing work-ready graduates (Mbah & Elobuike, 2016; Okoye & Okwelle, 2013). Recent empirical and programmatic literature offers guidance for enhancing collaboration. Successful models combine co-designed competency frameworks, formalized industry placements with clear learning objectives and supervision, faculty up-skilling through secondments, employer participation on curriculum advisory committees, and shared investment in equipment and simulators (Kluve et al., 2019; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020; Card et al., 2021).

Digital tools for managing placements and tracking graduate outcomes can strengthen transparency and responsiveness (World Bank, 2022). Complementary policy tax incentives for firms that host trainees, public funding tied to graduate employment rates, and quality assurance systems which further catalyze productive partnerships (ILO, 2021). This study therefore focuses on enhancing school-industry collaboration as a strategic pathway for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. It will examine how different collaboration mechanisms and institutional capacities influence the acquisition of both technical and transversal skills, how labour market signals can be better integrated into curriculum design, and which policy and incentive structures most effectively sustain employer engagement. By investigating these variables and their interactions, the study aims to produce evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, TVET managers, and industry partners to improve graduate employability and support inclusive economic development in Imo State.

Statement of the Problem

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) plays a vital role in equipping students with practical and employability skills needed for effective participation in the dynamic workplace. Despite the importance of TVET in promoting employment and technological development, many TVET graduates in Nigeria still lack the employability skills required by industries. Employers have continued to express concern that many graduates possess theoretical knowledge but lack practical competencies, communication abilities, problem-solving skills, teamwork, and technical expertise necessary for modern workplaces (Attah, Onwe, & Obi-Anike, 2025). This situation has contributed to unemployment and underemployment among TVET graduates.

One major factor responsible for this problem is the weak collaboration between schools and industries. In many TVET institutions, industries are rarely involved in curriculum planning, students' industrial training, practical skill development, and evaluation of graduates' competencies. As a result, students are exposed to inadequate practical experiences and outdated training facilities that do not reflect current industrial practices. Studies have shown that effective school-industry collaboration can improve students' employability skills through industrial attachment, practical exposure, and active participation of industry professionals in the training process (Agbo & Nnajiofor, 2023).

In Imo State, weak collaboration between TVET institutions and industries appears to have widened the employability skill gap among students. Although programmes such as the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) were established to strengthen school-industry relationships, many students still graduate without sufficient workplace experience and job-ready skills. If this challenge persists, graduates may continue to face difficulties in meeting labour market demands and securing gainful employment. Therefore,

there is a need to examine strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to determine the strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. Specifically, the study seeks to determine the:

1. Industrial strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State;
2. Institutional strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and industry personnel on the industrial strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State.
2. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and industry personnel on the institutional strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State.

Methodology

The survey research design was adopted for this study. According to Alio (2008) and Nworgu (2015), survey research design is a design in which a group of people or items are studied through the collection and analysis of data from a few individuals or items considered to be representative of the entire group. The adoption of this design was necessitated by the wide distribution of the respondents and the use of a polychotomously structured instrument for data collection. The study was carried out in Imo State, Nigeria. Imo State is one of the five states in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The population for the study consisted of 157 respondents made up of TVET lecturers in public institutions offering TVET programmes and human resource development managers from 56 functional industries in Imo State.

Specifically, 101 respondents were drawn from the institutions, while 56 respondents were drawn from industries. Since the population size was manageable, no sampling technique was adopted. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire containing a total of 18 items. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part A elicited information on the personal data of the respondents, while Part B contained 16 items grouped into two sections based on the research questions that guided the study. The questionnaire items were structured on a four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD), with numerical values of 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. The instrument was validated by three experts, while the reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient method, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.76. This agrees with Uzoagulu (2011), who stated that a reliability coefficient above 0.60 indicates that the instrument is reliable. Out of the 157 copies of the questionnaire distributed to respondents, 139 copies were properly completed and returned, representing an 88.54% return rate. The data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, while t-test statistics were used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance using SPSS.

Decisions on the questionnaire items were scored 4, 3, 2, 1 for Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD), and as applicable respectively. The decision mean was given as:

$$\dot{x} = \frac{4+3+2+1}{4} = 2.5$$

Thus, any response receiving a mean score of 2.5 and above is accepted/Agree whereas any response receiving a mean score of less than 2.5 is rejected/Disagree.

The standard deviation was used to determine the homogeneity or otherwise of the opinions of the respondents. For the T – test statistics, the T- test results were compared with the significant value (using SPSS) at 0.05 level of significance and at appropriate degree of freedom. The null hypotheses were determined at 0.05 significant level.

Results of the Study

The results of the study were presented according to research questions and hypotheses that guided the study.

Research Questions 1

What are the industrial strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

Table 1:

Mean rating and standard deviation on the industrial strategies for enhancing school industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

S/N	Institutional strategies for enhancing school industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students	Lecturers N = 91		Industry Personnel N= 48		Overall		
		X_1	SD_1	X_2	SD_2	X_G	SD_G	Decision
1	Preparing employability skill training programmes that will suit the school academic calendar.	3.17	0.79	3.28	0.98	3.23	0.89	Agree
2	Granting industry visit to various schools for relevant exposure in practical work.	3.42	0.67	3.44	0.82	3.43	0.75	Agree
3	Industry personnel participating in given special lectures.	3.09	0.93	3.09	0.94	3.10	0.94	Agree
4	Establishing employability skill acquisition programme for students	2.94	0.73	3.15	1.01	3.05	0.87	Agree
5	Organizing workshops/seminars by industries on contemporary issues in industry operation	3.28	0.61	3.40	0.76	3.34	0.69	Agree
6	Provision of scholarship to TVET students.	3.45	1.01	3.44	0.97	3.45	0.99	Agree
7	Granting TVET students SIWES opportunity.	3.47	0.73	3.17	0.84	3.32	0.79	Agree
8	Granting work study permits to TVET students.	3.37	0.92	3.39	0.87	3.38	0.89	Agree
9	Partnering with school in research/. development activities.	3.54	0.72	3.38	0.99	3.46	0.86	Agree
	Cluster Mean/ Standard Deviation	**3.30**	**0.79**	**3.31**	**0.91**	**3.31**	**0.85**	**Agree**

The result of data analysis shows that the overall mean rating of the respondents ranges from 3.05 to 3.46 indicating that the respondents agreed on the itemized as the Industrial strategies

in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

The overall cluster mean of 3.31 further shows that the respondents agreed in all the items. The low standard deviation obtained from data analysis indicates that the respondents have consensus opinion in their responses to the items.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference between the mean rating of lecturers and industry personnel on the Industrial strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

Table 2:
t-test analysis of mean rating of lecturers and industry personnel on the Industrial strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

Status	N	X	Mean difference	Df	T	Sig(2tailed)	Decision
Lecturers	91	3.30	2.9027	137	0.371	0.4291	Not
Industry Personnel	48	3.31					Significant

The result of data analysis in Table 2 shows that the t-value at 0.05 level of significant and 137 degrees of freedom for the nine items is 0.371 with significant value of 0.4291. Since the significant value of 0.4291 is more than 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is not significant. The implication is that there is no significant difference in the mean rating of lecturers and industry personnel's on the Industrial strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State. Therefore, the null hypothesis is upheld.

Research Questions 2

What are the Institutional strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

Table 3:
Mean rating and standard deviation on the Institutional strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

S/N	Institutional strategies for enhancing school. industry collaboration for bridging employability skill among TVET students	Lecturers N = 91		Industry Personnel N= 48		Overall	
		X_1	SD_1	X_2	SD_2	X_G	SD_G	Decision
10	Organising seminar that will unite school and industry workers.	3.39	0.94	3.36	0.78	3.38	0.86	Agree
11	Improving collaboration between school and industry through periodic meeting on technological innovation.	3.42	0.92	3.18	0.71	3.31	0.79	Agree
12	Ensuring effective communication with industries.	3.31	0.66	3.46	0.66	3.39	0.67	Agree
13	Narrowing the gap between theory/ practical through field trips/excursions.	3.25	0.81	3.17	1.06	3.23	0.94	Agree

14 Attracting industry representatives in Agree planning with management of school skill development activities.	3.13	0.78	3.42	0.92	3.28	0.85	
15 Upgrading the curriculum to meet the Agree labour market demand through industry . participation	3.25	0.69	3.31	0.82	3.28	0.74	
16 Encouraging joint development projects Agree initiative between school and industry.	3.37	0.75	3.23	0.84	3.30	0.79	
17 Employment of qualified industry staff in Agree teaching/research activities.	3.22	0.71	2.99	1.02	3.11	0.87	
18 Encouraging entrepreneurship development Agree among the students through industry oriented experiences among the student.	3.55	0.83	3.44	0.93	3.49	0.88	
Grand Mean/ Standard Deviation Agree	**3.33**	**0.79**	**3.28**	**0.86**	**3.31**	**0.82**	

The result presented in Table 3 depicts that the respondents overall mean rating ranges from 3.11 to 3.49 which shows that the itemized are the Institutional strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State. The overall cluster mean of 3.31 further indicated that the respondents totally agreed to the items as the institutions strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students. The low standard deviation shows that the respondents' responses do no differ remarkably.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and industry personnel on the Institutional strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

Table 4: t-test analysis on the mean rating of lecturers and industry personnel on the Institutional strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

Status	N	X	Mean difference	Df	T	Sig(2-tailed)	Decision
Lecturers	91	3.33	1.3491	137	0.547	0.483	Not
Industry Personnel	48	3.28					Significant

Table 4 above shows that the t-value at 0.05 level of significant and 137 degrees of freedom for the nine items is 0.547 with significant value of 0.483. Since the significant value of 0.483 is more than the 0.05 level of significant the null hypothesis is not significant. This invariably depicts that there is no significant difference on the mean rating of lecturers and industry personnel on the Institutional strategies in enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gap among TVET students in Imo State.

Discussion of findings

The findings of the study with respect to research question one revealed that respondents agreed on the identified Industrial strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. The strategies included designing skill-training programmes that align with the academic calendar of institutions, granting students opportunities for industrial visits, involving industry personnel in special lectures, establishing skill acquisition programmes, organizing workshops and seminars on contemporary industrial practices, providing scholarships to students, offering SIWES placements, granting work-study opportunities, and partnering with institutions in research and development activities.

The findings indicate that the active involvement of industries in the training process of TVET students can significantly contribute to the acquisition of employability skills required in modern workplaces. Such collaboration provides students with practical exposure, workplace experience, and opportunities to develop technical and soft skills demanded by employers.

Furthermore, effective school-industry collaboration promotes innovation, research development, and knowledge transfer between educational institutions and industries. These findings are consistent with the study of Attah, Onwe, and Obi-Anike (2025), who reported that strong collaboration between educational institutions and industries enhances graduate employability by providing opportunities for practical learning, skill development, and workplace readiness. The findings also agree with Agbo and Nnajiofor (2023), who emphasized that industry participation in TVET programmes is essential for equipping students with relevant competencies and reducing skill mismatches in the labour market.

The result of the test of null hypothesis one showed that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and industry personnel on the Industrial strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. This finding implies that both lecturers and industry personnel shared similar opinions regarding the effectiveness of the identified Industrial strategies. The consensus among the respondents suggests that sustainable collaboration in training, research, industrial attachment, and innovation can be achieved when industries actively participate in the educational process. Such cooperation can strengthen the employability outcomes of TVET graduates and improve their readiness for the labour market.

Furthermore, the findings relating to research question two revealed that respondents agreed on the identified institutional strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. These strategies included organizing seminars involving both school and industry personnel, strengthening collaboration through periodic meetings on technological innovations, maintaining effective communication channels with industries, reducing the gap between theoretical instruction and practical training, involving industry representatives in institutional activities, promoting joint development projects between schools and industries, and reviewing curricula to reflect current labour market needs.

The findings suggest that institutions have a crucial role to play in fostering effective collaboration with industries and ensuring that training programmes remain relevant to workplace requirements. By updating curricula, promoting practical learning experiences, and facilitating continuous interaction with industry experts, institutions can enhance the employability skills of TVET students and improve their transition into employment. These findings support the position of Otache (2022), who noted that strong polytechnic-industry collaboration contributes significantly to the development of employability skills and enhances graduates' labour market outcomes. The findings also corroborate those of Agbo and Nnajiofor (2023), who observed that regular engagement between educational institutions and industries promotes curriculum relevance, practical skill acquisition, and workforce preparedness.

The result of the test of null hypothesis two showed that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and industry personnel on the institutional strategies for enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. This finding indicates that both groups of respondents held similar views regarding the institutional strategies required to strengthen collaboration between schools and industries. The shared opinion demonstrates the possibility of developing a strong and sustainable partnership framework capable of improving employability skill acquisition among TVET students. Such collaboration can contribute to

producing graduates who possess the competencies, attitudes, and workplace skills needed to meet contemporary labour market demands.

Conclusion

The need to bridge employability skill gaps among TVET students has become increasingly important in response to rapid technological advancements, changing workplace requirements, and rising unemployment challenges. Effective school-industry collaboration has emerged as a critical mechanism for enhancing employability skills, promoting innovation, facilitating knowledge transfer, and preparing students for successful integration into the labour market. However, the findings of this study suggest that stakeholders in TVET programmes have not yet demonstrated sufficient commitment to establishing and sustaining the level of collaboration required to achieve these objectives.

Consequently, this study identified several industry and institutional strategies capable of enhancing school-industry collaboration for bridging employability skill gaps among TVET students in Imo State. The implementation of these strategies will strengthen partnerships between educational institutions and industries, improve practical learning opportunities, and equip students with the competencies demanded by contemporary workplaces. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Attah, Onwe, and Obi-Anike (2025), who emphasized that sustained collaboration between educational institutions and industries is essential for improving graduate employability and reducing skill mismatches in the labour market.

Therefore, institutions, industries, and other stakeholders must work together to maintain effective communication, strengthen partnerships, and create a collaborative framework that supports the development of employable and industry-ready TVET graduates.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Industries should recognize the importance of sustained collaboration with TVET institutions through SIWES, industrial attachment, and workplace learning opportunities to help bridge employability skill gaps among TVET students.
2. Institutions offering TVET programmes should establish and maintain effective communication channels with industries to facilitate regular interaction, feedback, and collaboration on skill development initiatives.
3. Industries should develop structured employability skill development programmes for students, particularly during SIWES, focusing on practical competencies, problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and workplace ethics.
4. Industry personnel should actively participate in lecture delivery, practical demonstrations, mentoring, and skills training activities in TVET institutions to expose students to current industrial practices and expectations.
5. TVET institutions should periodically review and update their curricula in collaboration with industry stakeholders to ensure that course contents reflect current labour market demands and emerging technologies.
6. Regular workshops, seminars, career talks, and industry-based training programmes should be jointly organized by schools and industries to enhance students' employability skills and workplace readiness.
7. Industries and institutions should collaborate on research, innovation, and development projects that provide students with opportunities to acquire hands-on experience and industry-relevant competencies.
8. Government agencies and educational authorities should provide policy support and incentives that encourage stronger school-industry collaboration for the effective development of employability skills among TVET students.
9. Industries should increase the number of internship, apprenticeship, and work-study opportunities available to TVET students to improve their practical experience and transition into employment.

10. TVET institutions should establish Industry Advisory Committees comprising industry experts and academics to provide continuous guidance on skills requirements, curriculum improvement, and graduate employability.

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