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# Human Resources Management Professionals' Experience with Online Degree Holders in Recruitment

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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2019

Abstract

Human Resources Management Professionals' Experience with Online Degree Holders

in Recruitment

by

Dominic Isaac

MSc, Liverpool University, 2016

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

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## Abstract

Online degree holders in Nigeria have poor acceptability during recruitment and promotion decisions because of reliability and legality perceptions of online degrees. There is little knowledge about how human resource (HR) managers identify employability skills in online degree holders. Guided by Bills's screening conceptual framework, the purpose of this case study was to explore how Nigerian recruiters identify employability skills in online degree holders. The participants for this study consisted of 2 participants from each of 10 sectors covering the government and nongovernmental organizations; participants had at least 5 years' experience in working with online degree holders. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 20 participants. Yin's 5-step data analysis process was used with triangulation and member checking to analyze the findings. The findings of this research indicate that, contrary to earlier suggestions of low rating and poor acceptability of online degrees, HR experts in Nigeria have a high regard for the employability skills in online degree holders. The study produced 4 major findings: the possession of relevant skills by online degree holders, degree type does not form the determinant factor in recruitment, discovery strategies, and going beyond mere perception. The findings of this study may bring about positive social change toward policy changes in Nigeria regarding the adoption of online education. The results of the study can lead to positive recommendations for online degree holders, seekers of online degrees, online higher institutions, employers, and public policy makers.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral program to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ whose grace and mercy brought me into his love. I dedicate the doctoral degree to my dear wife Mrs. Rebecca Isaac (Da Ree), who suffered 7 years of deprivation while I pursued online master's and PhD. I appreciate your love and labor toward me and the entire family. I dedicate this work to my children, John and Grace, who gave me strength and courage to move on. To my mother (Da Lydia), my siblings Sister Olivia, Alberto, Felicia, Ann, Austine, and Amarachi, I say thank you for all your support and for cheering me up to the finishing line. To my leaders and church members whose lives encourage me, I dedicate this degree to you all.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In recent years, online education has become widespread. The growth of online education shows that some stakeholders are overcoming their negative perceptions and recognizing online degrees (Allen, & Seaman, 2015; Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). As a result, more students are enrolling in an online degree program at an increasing rate compared to brick and mortar universities (Allen, & Seaman, 2013). However, despite the rise of online education, in Nigeria the employability of online degree holders is still low because of perceptions regarding the reliability and legality of online education (Agbebaku, & Adavbiele, 2016). Employers' decisions to hire online degree holders is subject to their interpretation of online degree credibility (James, Larry, & Terry, 2015; Roberto, & Johnson, 2017). The challenges HR professionals face while identifying employability skills among online degree holders has become a global concern (Blackmore, Bulaitis, Jackman, & Tan, 2016).

HR professionals in Nigeria need to identify employability skills of online degree holders from online universities and Nigerian universities. Recruitment criteria should not be based on the reliability of online degree-granting institutions but the overall employees' skill sets (Ayo, Odukoya, & Azeta, 2014). HR professionals' acceptance of online education could motivate working-class groups to seek an online education to enhance their competitiveness in the job. However, a gap in the literature exists regarding strategies HR professionals could deploy to understand the employability of online degree holders (Dowling, & Wilson, 2017). This study's findings could change employers' negative outlook toward online education, which could lead to more



acceptance of online degrees. The success of online universities could connect remote communities and vulnerable sectors in Nigeria with knowledge, which can foster economic growth of the country.

In Chapter 1, I identify the gap in the literature regarding HR professionals' strategies to discover employability skills of online degree holders. In Chapter 2, I review the literature that describes the framework that aligns the various approaches for identifying employability skills in online degree holders. I also address the prospects and challenges relating to the identification of employability skills in online degree holders. In Chapter 3, I describe the research methodology.

### **Background to the Problem**

Employment and promotion decisions by HR managers require the evaluation of many factors. For example, HR managers may look at a job applicant's degree type, which some HR managers hold preconceived ideas about (Grossman, & Johnson, 2017). This can result in bias in a selection process, and therefore it is important to base employability on a thorough investigation of the employee's overall background (Cai, 2013). For instance, some research indicates that HR management professionals prefer applicants with face-to-face degrees over online degree holders (Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014). This preference stems from the perception that traditional degree holders have better competencies, better interactions, and more quality outcomes than online degree holders (Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014). However, students are enrolling into online degree programs at an increasing rate (Allen, & Seaman, 2013).

Despite negative perceptions of online degrees, some studies have indicated that HR managers have positive evaluations and acceptance of online degrees in hiring decisions (Deaconu, Osoian, Zaharie, & Achim, 2014; Fogle, & Elliot, 2013; James et al., 2015). Some of the online degrees that are found to be acceptable to HR managers in hiring decisions include online MBA degrees (Bailey, & Flegle, 2012; Roberto & Johnson, 2017). HR managers also accept faculty with online doctoral degrees (DePriest, & Absher, 2013). Another area where HR managers accept online degrees in hiring decisions includes online accounting degrees (Grossman, & Johnson, 2016, 2017; James et al., 2015).

Prior literature has focused on the challenges of open and distance education and human development in Nigeria (Ayo et al., 2014), and the reliability and legality of online education in Nigeria (Agbebaku, & Adavbiele, 2016). There are studies on the challenges as well as prospects of transiting from the face-to-face education to open and distance learning in Nigerian higher-education institutions (Oluniyi, 2012). However, there is little research on how HR managers identify employability skills in online degree holders. A study of how HR managers identify the presence or absence of employability skills in online degree holders in Nigeria could add to the literature regarding the benefits of online higher education. Thus, this study may help HR management professionals develop a better evaluation process for online degrees. The study may also help to discover the online degree holders' potentials and contributions to economic growth in Nigeria. The present study may also encourage higher institutions in Nigeria to see online higher education as a viable option, which can improve enrollment for students.

### **Problem Statement**

Research indicates that some HR management professionals prefer applicants with face-to-face degrees over online degrees (Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014; Joseph, 2017; James et al., 2015). But other studies have suggested a positive evaluation and acceptance of online degrees in hiring decisions (Deaconu et al., 2014; Fogle, & Elliot, 2013; James et al., 2016). When students want to embark on an online program, they need to understand of how HR managers accept or reject online degrees. The acceptance or rejection level may vary according to national policy, degree, or industry type (Bailey, & Flegle, 2012; Grossman, & Johnson, 2016) and insight into the variability of acceptance or rejection will be beneficial to all stakeholders (Gaskell, & Mills, 2014; Kaupins, Wanek, & Coco, 2014).

The general problem addressed in this study is that some HR managers do not identify employability skills in online degree holders during hiring decisions (Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014; Fogle & Elliot, 2013). In Nigeria, for instance, the reliability of online degree skills has a low rating by public and private sector employers who are looking for dependability, adaptability, workplace attitude, and working skills (Agbebaku, & Adavbiele, 2016). The specific problem is that online degrees are deemed unacceptable for employment in Nigeria in multiple sectors, government agencies being a prime example (Agbebaku, & Adavbiele, 2016; Fogle, & Elliot, 2013; Yakasai, 2017).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify the presence or absence of employability

skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions. Participants were directors and heads of HR departments from various industries in Nigeria including banking, government, education, aviation, telecommunications, transport, health, finance, and consulting. The participants are HR managers who have accepted online degree holders in their workforce such as banks, oil and gas, and Nigerian government employers. I interviewed 20 participants made up of HR management professionals drawn from the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria (CIPMN). The CIPMN has HR professionals in its membership across different industries experienced in employment decisions and policies. I chose the participants with partial, full, or no online degree experience. Sharing their experiences regarding motivating or inhibiting factors toward accepting online degrees into the workforce may benefit students by providing information on which industries and sectors accept or reject online degrees and the level of acceptability. International and local universities may also benefit from the study regarding what measures to take in policy decisions as it relates to employability skills in online degree holders in Nigeria.

### **Research Question**

One major research question applied to the study: How do HR managers identify the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online degrees during job placement and promotion decisions?

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is a lens a researcher uses in the development of knowledge that enhances the understanding of the underlying paradigm of a research

study (Lander, 2013). For this study, I used the framework of schooling and job assignment relationship (see Bills, 2003). Bills (2003) explained that there is empirical evidence regarding the relationship between educational attainments and socioeconomic attainment. There are seven conceptual components in the framework: human capital, cultural capital, screening, signaling, control, institutional and credentials concepts in employment decisions. In every aspect of the framework, there is a need to evaluate how applicants and employers use labor market information in job seeking and recruitment decisions.

The concepts of screening and signaling play a greater role in HR management recruitment decisions. Screening is the mechanism through which employers gather and react to imperfect information of job seekers (Bills, 2003). HR managers evaluate both face-to-face and online degree holders by personal characteristics such as job experience, academic credentials, sex, and race. Because applicants can choose which academic credentials they have for securing a job (Bills, 2003), it is important to decide whether a face-to-face or online degree is valuable. It is important to evaluate how HR managers have a preference in one form of a degree when investments occur in both forms of degrees.

Face-to-face schools are not the only models where individuals and job seekers can have qualities that attract employers (Kaupins, Wanek, & Coco, 2014). Online higher institutions change people who are without or who have limited physical interaction (Gaskell, & Mills, 2014). Regardless of format, schools should add value to potential workers in skills that yield to supervision and control. In this study, I sought to find out

how HR management professionals identify such employability skills in applicants with online degrees. Bills's framework explains that employers use educational degrees to secure employees with the needed qualities. The concepts of schooling and recruitment provide a checklist to measure HR managers' perception of face-to-face and online degrees. Thus, this framework was useful to help focus the study on ways and factors that constitute challenges to investment in online degrees by Nigerians.

In this study, I investigated the factors responsible for the acceptance of online degrees by some of the Nigerian private and public sector employers. Some of the areas of focus included challenges of attitudinal dispositions on online models, screening, signaling, skills development, and how HR managers in other sectors in Nigerian address these issues. The conceptual framework was central to the present study, as it forms the lens for understanding employers' perceptions of online degrees. It also enhanced the understanding of processes of signaling for employment opportunities by online degree holders.

### **Nature of the Study**

Research methods can be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods (Wisdom, Cavaleri, Onwuegbuzie, & Green, 2012). When exploring a human issue in a real-world situation, researchers adopt a qualitative research approach to investigate how and why the issue occurs (Robert, 2014; Yin, 2014). In this research, I adopted a qualitative case study approach to investigate HR management professionals' experiences in identifying employability skills in online degree holders. A quantitative study is appropriate when the research involves statistical, numerical, or computational selection and analysis of

data (Fehrmann, Gregoire, & Klein, 2012). A mixed method study is applicable when research requires overlapping methodologies between the qualitative and quantitative (Ineson, 2014). A qualitative approach to the study was appropriate because I studied factors not suited to quantitative methods (Herron, & Quinn, 2016; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Qualitative researchers also use this approach for adjustable methods when no standardized methods are needed in generating relevant data to a problem (Ritchie et al., 2013). Examples of qualitative research approaches include grounded theory, the narrative, case study, phenomenology, and ethnography (Yin, 2014). I did not use any statistical method in data collection but made use of semistructured interviews for data collection.

### **Definitions**

*Employability skills:* Employability skills are the range of varying skills that employers look for in candidates that will serve as a foundation for technical knowledge and skills for a job (Collet, Hine, & Plessis, 2015).

*Soft skills:* Soft skills are the skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than formal or technical knowledge (Rao, 2014). These skills are the polite and pleasing presentation of hard skills.

*Hard skills:* Hard skills are technical skills, core skills, and domain skills that go with the complementary roles of soft skills (Rao, 2014).

*Human resources (HR) professionals:* HR professionals are practitioners who identify, manage, develop and retain skills and talents for job placement, promotion and organizational performance (Potgieter, & Ferreira, 2018; Uitzinger, Chrysler-Fox, &

Thomas, 2018). In the context of this study, I considered HR professionals within various industries in Nigeria.

*Online degrees:* Online degrees are academic degrees that are earned entirely through Internet-connected computer and not through face-to-face education (Chebl, & Rayess, 2017).

*Face-to-face degrees:* Face-to-face degrees are academic degrees that students earn or obtain from traditional education within face-to-face academic environment (Roberto, & Johnson, 2017).

*Degree type:* Degree type refers to the categorization of academic degrees by mode of delivery before the type of degree a candidate earns (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017).

*Hiring decisions:* Hiring decisions are the judgments and conclusions of HR professionals during the recruitment of job applicants and job placements (Tylečková, Prokopová, & Skarnitzl, 2017). The judgments and conclusions may be positive or negative leading to the acceptance or rejection of a job applicant.

*Skills development:* Skills development refers to skill formation, skill embedment, and skill enhancement strategies that bring about employability qualities (Graf, & Gardin, 2018).

*Recruitment:* Recruitment refers to processes that enable employers to find and hire the most qualified applicant for job placements (Ritchie, Ashworth, & Bades, 2018).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are true and plausible parameters that form the focus of a study (Nkwake, 2013). Assumptions are true only on a temporary basis and are for a



specific purpose and theory building (Ronald, 2014). In this study, I researched on the assumption that Nigerian HR professionals provided candid and honest answers to interview questions. I assumed that participants in the study are HR professionals who have experience in recruiting or promoting holders of online degrees during job placement or promotion decisions. I also assumed that participants had a genuine interest to participate in this study and did not have ulterior motives during participation.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

#### **Scope of Study**

The scope of the present study provided the boundaries of the research. In this study, the boundaries included recruiting HR professionals in Nigeria from different industries who recruited or promoted face-to-face and online degree holders. The HR professionals were from the rank of senior managers to HR directors in their organizations. I recruited 20 heads of HR departments who are responsible for employment and promotion decisions in the banking, government, education, aviation, telecommunications, transport, health, finance, and consulting sectors in Nigeria. I conducted semistructured interviews with participants to explore how employers identify employability skills in online degree holders during employment decisions. I also reviewed documents for the particular HR professionals starting from manager category to directors. To achieve transferability in this study, I provide a detailed explanation of the findings of the study, which can help future users or readers to decide to apply the results in other study contexts and locations. The explanations to enhance transferability cover research methods, research design, and presentation of data.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations enable the researcher to set the boundaries and scope of the study and establishes interviewees' selection and study location (Simon, & Goes, 2018). In this study, the research question, purpose of the study, and the participants' selection criteria guided the delimitations. The research question sought to investigate how HR professionals identify employability skills in holders of online degrees. I set the boundary to be HR professionals who are members of CIPMN with experience in employing and promoting holders of face-to-face and online degrees. The participants were HR professionals from the rank of senior managers and HR directors. I conducted the semistructured interviews offsite in Port Harcourt, Abuja, and Lagos physically outside their organizations.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are procedural weaknesses in a study (Mitchell, & Jolly, 2013) that show up out of the control of the researcher (Simon, & Goes, 2018). In this study, one of the limitations includes my choice of a qualitative case study. Another limitation was that I did not get a truly random sample of HR professionals. Getting the participants' honest responses and within a given time was another limitation of this study. However, I strove to carry out the study in a way that minimized personal bias. Regarding dependability, I used member checking and transcripts. I cannot guarantee that the findings have generalizability.

### **Significance of the Study**

HR management professionals' evaluations when recruiting holders of online degrees has become a management issue (Allen, & Seaman, 2015; Allen et al., 2016). There are indications that some HR management professionals hold a negative attitude about online degrees, and this has become a concern to job applicants and other stakeholders (Preston, 2014). This study may bring positive social change to stakeholders in online degree programs including online degree administrators, governments, students, and HR managers.

### **Significance to Practice**

Because the study is a case study, it may be useful to online education and employment practices. The study may be useful to Nigerian online degree holders, who can benefit by understanding employers' acceptability of the skills they hope to bring into the labor market. Management professionals aspiring to acquire online degrees can also appreciate that investment decisions into an online degree are not a waste (Kane, Shaw, Pang, Salley, & Snider, 2016). The study may benefit some working-class individuals who wish to apply for online education to enhance their competitiveness in the labor market.

Information on employability skills issues of online degrees could also help Nigerian universities that are struggling to transition to new formats. The results of this research may contribute to the evaluation of online education as one option to improve the cost management of higher education in Nigeria. An additional significance of the study may be more enrollments recorded by Nigerian universities. The findings of this

research may help the Nigerian universities' management and other interested stakeholders to develop a positive attitude toward online education. The study may also be helpful to the leadership of the Nigerian government to consider further regulations to correct the negative attitude and non-acceptance of online degrees for employment.

### **Significance to Theory**

Investigating how current HR professionals in Nigeria are evaluating online degree skills could bring insights into the real causes of negative or positive perception. Some have argued that these evaluations are a result of negative press and lack of measuring metrics of quality of degree outcomes (Allen, & Seaman, 2015; Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). The study could add to the theory of acceptability of online degrees by showing special degrees that online education brings to the labor market.

There is a lack of research on how HR professionals who have employed online degree holders identify the employability skills. This study can strengthen those who favor the superiority or equality of online degrees. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify employability skills in online degree holders. Future researchers may reflect where HR professionals were not able to identify employability skills of online degree holders. Thus, this study may be useful to future researchers who have an interest in advancing the body of knowledge on employability skills of online degree holders.

**Significance to Social Change**

This study could lead to a positive social change for individuals who lack confidence in the prospects of online higher education in Nigeria. Additionally, the results may encourage the adoption of online education models. There could also be a positive social change in job applicants who are holders of online degrees, as the results can provide understanding of how HR professional evaluate the degree they bring into the workforce. Online degree holders or employees may have a better understanding of how to present the skills they possess. The results of this study could also help Nigerian universities use online education as a cost saving approach to higher education management. Promoting positive social change may also come in the form of an increase in students' admission into universities as well as reducing the high level of unemployment in the country.

**Summary**

In Chapter 1, I provided an alignment between the problem statement and purpose of the study, the research question, and the conceptual framework. I conducted this study on directors and heads of HR departments from various industries in Nigeria: banking, government, education, aviation, telecommunications, transport, health, finance, and consulting outfits. The participants included HR managers who have accepted online degree holders in their workforce.

In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature regarding the relevant gap in the literature. Chapter 2 contains a literature review, synthesis of prior studies on employability skills, and analysis to grant evaluation of the study. The literature review

also includes a discussion on employability skills challenges across the globe and HR professionals' practices regarding the identification of employability skills. I also review the conceptual frameworks for this study and the literature on the perception of online degrees in employment decisions. I also review employability skills such as communication skills, job performance, and soft skills and hard skills.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this study I addressed the identification of employability skills in online degree holders. One important issue absent in most research is strategies for identifying employability skills in online degree holders during recruitment decisions (James et al., 2015). The employability skills gap or shortage in graduates has become a global challenge that has created problems for job seekers and mostly online degree holders (Ali, 2017; Asonitou, 2015). Several researchers have suggested different ways of developing and improving employability chances of graduates in the labor market (Clokier, 2016; Coetzee, 2014; Cole, & Tibby, 2013). The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate how HR managers identified the availability of employability skills in holders of online degrees during recruitment and promotion decisions.

The focus of the literature review was to identify literature on the employability skills challenge among online degree holders. The first section of the literature review is focused on the conceptual framework (Bills, 2003; Cole, & Tibby, 2013). In the second section of the literature review, I review employability skills challenges around some continents of the world. The third section of the literature review covers an in-depth evaluation of various debates around employability skills, which involve the definition of employability skills, the nature and models of employability, and cultural and economic influences on employability skills. The section also includes employability and the labor market, oppositions to employability skills policies, practices, and bridging employability gaps. The fourth and final section illustrates the employability skills challenge of online

degrees and the various trends in current literature. Many studies are focused on perceptions and acceptability of online degrees (DePriest, & Absher, 2013; Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014; Gaskell, & Mills, 2014; Grossman, & Johnson, 2016), but there is a gap in the literature regarding how employers who accept online degrees in hiring decisions identify the potentials and employability skills of such applicants.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

In searching for relevant literature regarding the employability skills problem between employers and job applicants, I used Google Scholar, Emerald Insight, ProQuest Central, and ABI/INFORM, Sage Premier, Science Direct, and EBSCOhost. I looked for words such as *employability*, *employability skills*, *perceptions of employability*, and *developing employability*. Other search words included *human resources perception of employability*, *labor market and employability*, *evaluation of employability*, *responses to employability*, and *areas of employability*, *online degrees*, and *acceptability of online degrees*. The search equally focused on such words as *employability gaps*, *employability critiques*, *identifying employability skills*, and *embedding employability*. To gather literature that is current on the subject matter of the study, I limited my search of peer-reviewed journals to be within 5 years of publication. I used other relevant literature from other topics on employment decisions to gather knowledge of the study. I searched for key words that relate to employer decision-making on the identification of employability skills.



## **Conceptual Framework**

I used concepts of employability as well as signaling and screening as the conceptual framework for this study. Cole and Tibby (2013) found that employability is the responsibility of the higher education managers, students, employers, and the government. Bills (2003) also noted that for graduates to be employed, there should be a consideration of signaling and screening. Thus, employability development requires ensuring that graduates have needed employability skills for job placement decisions. There are four components of the employability conceptual framework. The components are a sound understanding of employability skills, which requires stakeholders to define and create employability that integrates the views of other stakeholders. The second component is developing employability skills models (Cole, & Tibby, 2013). There is also the sharing and enhancing existing skills practices, the third component, and the fourth component is measuring and reviewing employability skills practices (Cole, & Tibby, 2013).

### **Sound Understanding of Employability Skills**

The definition and understanding of employability skills have been shifting throughout history (Williams, Dodd, Steele, & Randall, 2015). Some authors define *employability skills* as core competencies for obtaining employment (Adeyinka-Ojo, 2018; Chhinzer, & Russo, 2018; Cole, & Tibby, 2013). Other researchers argue that employability skills go beyond employment and include competencies that enable employees to make progress within the organization (Bridgstock, Goldsmith, Rodgers, & Hearn, 2015; Byrom, & Aiken, 2014). There are also views that employability skills

include employees' and job applicants' capabilities that enable organizations to achieve their strategic goals (Bridgstock, & Cunningham, 2016; Collet, Hine, & Plessis, 2015). The different views and definitions affect the policies and approaches of stakeholders in addressing the employability skills challenge. The view on employability skills depends on the individual view and context.

Employability skills have also been broken down into a list of transferable skills that employers are expecting from potential employees: personal qualities, basic academic skills, and high order thinking as well as team-work, critical thinking, communication skills, and technical skills (Fayeq, 2017). Other skills include planning, self-motivation, organizing, integrity, and interpersonal skills (Fayeq, 2017). Further, technical skills can be differentiated from soft skills, which are identifiable through field work and managerial abilities respectively (Febriana, Premono, & Iriani, 2018). Employability skills can also be broken down into employability assets, which includes attitudes, skills, and knowledge; deployment skills that include job skills and career management skills; presentation skills that cover securing of the job such as writing CVs and techniques of approaching interviews; and personal circumstances such as external factors, and family responsibilities (Foerster-Pastor, Ulrike, & Golowko, 2017).

### **Developing Employability Skills**

The development of employability skills has various approaches just as the definitions and categorizations also differ (Graham, 2017). Another debate on employability skills is whose responsibility it is to embed or develop employability skills (Devambatla, & Nalla, 2015; Drange, Bernstrom, & Mamelund, 2018). In the United

Kingdom, for instance, the assumption is that higher education providers are responsible for embedding and developing skills (Tyrer, Ives, & Corke, 2013). A more robust approach regarding the responsibility of developing, embedding, and possessing employability skills is the view that the solution comes from all stakeholders (Drange et al., 2018). In this approach, a combination of students' efforts, the higher education providers embedding of skills, and the employers' support will guarantee acceptable employability skills (Drange et al., 2018).

Some stakeholders have approached employability skills development through work-integrated learning frameworks (Jackson, 2015). The work-integrated learning employability skills development model involves students' placement in industries while in school. However, there can be barriers to skills acquisition such as inexperience and lack of support from experienced company employees. The personal traits that enhance transfer of employability skills from the classroom to the place of work include "openness," "extraversion," and "conscientiousness" as well as work related experiences (Jackson, 2016).

In European countries, some stakeholders view the development of employability skills as the sole responsibility of higher education to provide practical training, research, and involvement of employers (Pavlin, 2014). Cole and Tibby (2013) also posited that employability skills embedded into main higher education curricula continues to be the priority of universities, government, employers, and colleges. The different skills that higher education can embed into higher education learning include development learning,

emotional intelligence, generic skills, experience, and degree subject knowledge (Cole, & Tibby, 2013).

A model for the development and evaluation of employability skills in higher education include the USEM and employability development profile approaches (Cole, & Tibby, 2013; Dacre, Qualter, & Peter, 2014). The USEM model represents understanding of the subject, skillful practices, efficacy belief, and meta-cognition. Although the USEM has been found to be relevant, it does not allow proper understanding by students and parents. In contrast, the employability development profile model developed by CareerEDGE has a better application than USEM (Cole, & Tibby, 2013; Dacre et al., 2014). It can help students, academics, and those new in a course to understand what employability skill is about. However, the employability development profile measures employability skills from the students' point of view (Cutts, Hooley, & Yates, 2015). The perception of students regarding employability may not count where the decision of job placement rests with the perception and acceptance of the recruiter (Greenbank, 2014).

### **Sharing and Enhancing Employability Skills Practices**

Sharing and enhancing employability skills among stakeholders is one way of making progress after choosing a model (Cole, & Tibby, 2013). There are different views and word usage that stakeholders employ when sharing and enhancing employability skills (Coetzee, 2014; Osmani et al., 2015). Some practitioners use such words as *competencies*, *capabilities*, *attributes*, and *attitudes* in describing graduates' abilities (Daniels, & Brooker, 2014). Regardless of word usage, stakeholders can address the challenge of sharing and enhancing skills by identifying a skills gap, identifying how to

share and access best practices, and finding supportive partners (Cole, & Tibby, 2013). Some of the partners may come from higher institutions, business organizations, and student bodies (Pinto, & Taveira, 2013; Pitan, 2016). For example, in Liverpool's John Moore University, the supportive role of all stakeholders provided a robust, credible, and unique way of achieving sharing and enhancement (Tyrer et al., 2013). The institution first sought to understand the current views and perspectives of stakeholders and students. Another step was to create a national employer advisory group and to engage various local employers. Additionally, the university established key performance indicators and developed resources and feedback mechanisms (Tyrer et al., 2013).

### **Measuring and Evaluating Employability Skills**

After setting up employability sharing and enhancement practices, the strategies must be evaluated and measured (Pavin, 2014). Grotkowska, Wincenciak, and Gajderowicz (2015) argue that evaluating the strategies has become necessary as higher education is gradually moving from "ivory-tower" concept to market-oriented enterprises. One way to cope with the market-oriented approach is to pursue employers' and students' satisfaction through employability models (Eurico et al., 2015; Smith, & Worsfold, 2014). Some of the approaches to carry out regular evaluation of employability skills is through framework and pedagogy evaluations (Govender, & Taylor, 2015; Teal, 2013; Thorley, 2014). A major challenge, however, is that there is no way of knowing inhibiting or supporting factors in all subjects or programs (Rutt et al., 2013).

One model for measuring and evaluating employability skills practices is called SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results; Kumar, 2015). Employers,

higher institutions, and students could adopt this measuring and evaluation model to examine the development, progress, and results of employability goals. For example, a higher education provider can evaluate the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results of their students and incorporate the same into the pedagogy (Kumar, 2015). Employers can also assess the strengths of potential employees, the opportunities available within the organization, the aspirations, and results within any organizational job process. The challenge remains that most higher education providers see employability embedment into institutions' strategy as an added load (Jackson, 2014a; Kumar, 2015; Lau, Hsu, Acosta, & Hsu, 2014). Another disadvantage is that some students are in school to get their certificates and do not care what the opportunities in the future may be (Kumar, 2015).

### **Employability Skills: Cultural, Political, and Economic Influences**

Within high education management, the issue of employability skills is global (Kalfa, & Taksa, 2015; Pavlin, & Svetlik, 2016). For instance, Govender and Taylor (2015) found that the employability skills debate is increasing worldwide. This means that policy and decision-makers are addressing the topic from different cultures as well as economic and political climates (Rutt et al., 2013; Tran, 2015; Wilton, 2014). There are cultural variations across the globe that play a role in employability skills debate (Artess, Mellors-Bourne, & Hooley, 2017). For example, in some cultures, dress code can be an influential factor in employability skills (Cutts, Hooley, & Yates, 2015), whereas in other regions, it could be the influence of industry speakers (Reibe, Sibson, Roepen, & Meakins, 2013). In places like Bahrain, simple English communication skills can be a

major requirement that employers need in job placement (Thomas, Piquette, & McMaster, 2015). These cultural differences on what constitutes employability skills lead to issues in defining and developing these skills (Wilton, 2014).

Political influences also play their roles in shaping the employability skills debate. According to Rich (2015), pressure is put higher education providers to provide certain skills. Policy makers, employers, and parents view the employability opportunities of their graduates to have a link only to what the higher institutions include (Hill, Walkington, & France, 2016). Some stakeholders blame higher education providers of focusing only on profit-making strides at the expense of producing graduates who can secure jobs (Rich, 2015). Some stakeholders expect that graduates must be employed once they graduate with the requisite skills. However, skills acquisition does not imply the availability of job vacancies, making the pressure on higher education providers unnecessary (Cappelli, 2015).

From the economic front, some researchers have linked employability challenges to the 2008 to 2009 financial crisis (Hill et al., 2016; Kalfa, & Taksa, 2015; Pavlin, & Svetlik, 2014). The financial crisis has led to an increase in interests regarding employability as well as the argument that higher education providers are not producing the needed skills (Arora, 2015). Even in countries where the impact of the financial crisis was not serious, there has been reframing of employability skills (Cerqueira et al., 2016; Jackson, 2014b). In the United Kingdom, for instance, the focus on employability has increased, which may be due to an increase in the marketization of higher education (Blackmore et al., 2016; Pemberton et al., 2013; Wilton, 2014).

## **Oppositions to Employability Theories**

There have been different debates on the policy focus on employability skills (Arora, 2015; Kettis et al., 2013; Reid, 2016; Rich, 2015; Tran, 2015). The opposition ranges from poor definition of employability to the topic being meaningless.

Additionally, there is the assertion that a strong policy on employability negatively affects the autonomy and integrity of higher education providers. There are those who fault the topic that it is not the role of higher education to track the employability skills of students (Arora, 2015; Kettis et al., 2013; Reid, 2016; Rich, 2015; Tran, 2015). On the other hand, some argue that it is only higher education that can embed employability skills without considering the role of other stakeholders. A further line is drawn by other opposition that employability skills argument is uncalled for (Reid, 2016).

Another argument against a strong policy focus on graduate employability is that it focuses only on employers' need and employment at the expense of students' and higher education needs. Nonetheless, it is important that all sides of the debate agree that higher education has some benefits for students, higher education providers, employers, and society. One of these benefits includes employability of graduates (Govender, & Taylor, 2015). The employability debate calls for more careful incorporation into the academic and other stakeholders' priorities (Speight et al., 2013).



## **Literature Review**

### **Employability Skills Challenge in the United States of America**

In the United States, there is an explosion of concerns regarding the supply of employability skills among the labor force (Cappeli, 2015). The shortage of employability skills as the author found has led to many reports and complains from government, independent, and employer organizations. The shortage of employability skills was found to exist in both online and face to face degree holders (Adams, 2016; Griffiths, Inman, Rojas, & Williams, 2018). Some of the skills found to be in short supply in the United States, as well as other regions, include critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills (Mellors-Bourne, Robinson, & Metcalfe, 2016). The shortage of these employability skills is at such a time when technological advancements and uncertainties call for students to be ready for employment landscapes that are uncertain (Wolff, & Booth, 2017).

Some research findings argue that universities struggle to align learning outcomes with employability skills (Anastasiu et al., 2017; Clarke, 2017). Cappelli (2015) posited that the complaint about a shortage of employability skills in the United States is unwarranted. According to the author, there seems to exist what the author found to be over educated workforce in the United States about employability skills. Some of the reasons being that the argument for the shortage of skills does not hold when there are very few vacancies among American employer organizations (Cappelli, 2015). There

seems to be a gap in the literature on reconciling research findings of a shortage of employability skills and job vacancies in the United States.

### **Employability Skills Challenge in Europe**

In Europe, the challenge of improving employability skills of graduates from mere disciplinary based teaching to problem-solving competencies has gained more ascent (Pavlin, & Svetlik, 2014; Tyrer, Ives, & Corke, 2013). European young peoples' aspiration and future prosperity have been found to suffer serious damage as a result of skills shortage and mismatch between employers' need and products of the education system (Calonge, & Shah, 2016). The growing demand to address this challenge in Europe has led to a collaboration among higher education institutions in the region (Baker, Loughren, & Crone, 2014). The authors noted that these higher education institutions contacted employers from countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Greece, and the Czech Republic to evaluate the employability skills of their graduates. The results showed that employers rated the employability skills of graduates lower than expectations. For example, in Greece, employers' evaluation of employability skills was found to be lower than other European countries (Tsitskari, Tsalouchou, Michalopoulou, & Goudas, 2017).

In other to address these employability skills concern, the university of Liverpool, for instance, has commenced the implementation and embedding of employability programs into mainstream studies (Tyrer, Ives, & Corke, 2013). The employability skills program in the Liverpool University involves what the authors termed a super-convergence between careers delivery and academic libraries departments. One major

challenge regarding the mode and approach of Liverpool University may be the evaluation which employers will give her graduates at the end of the day. Employability, according to Wilton (2014) depends on the eye of the beholder. So, the debate may not end with an institution putting structures in place and deems the structures to be final measures to address the problem. It is one thing to adopt a particular solution to improve employability skills expectation, and it is quite another issue for employers to accept the product of what is put in place to enhance employability skills.

### **Employability Skills Challenge in Asia**

In Asia, Singh, Thambusamyb, Ramly, Abdullah, and Mahmud (2013) indicated a damaging report regarding employability skills crisis in the continent. The authors found that about 70% of graduates from both private and public universities are unemployed as a result of these institutions' failure to adopt a sufficiently rigorous educational system that can produce a capable workforce that satisfies industry needs. Some of the areas of lack of employability skills include communication skills, lack of creativity, unwillingness to accept low salaries, and being selective among others (Singh et al., 2013).

There is a difficulty in the meaning, findings, and recommendations for solving employability skills problem such as the one by Singh et al. (2013) above. Some of the indicators of lack of employability such as unwillingness to accept low salaries make the definition of employability skills to hold contended meanings (Sin, & Neave, 2016). Irrespective of lack of consensus in the definition of employability skills, Paterson (2017) agreed to the existence of employability skills challenge in the Asian continent. He posits

that as a response, embedding employability skills into higher learning education is what will address industry demands. Some of the skills identified for incorporation into Asian higher learning system include creative thinking skills, listening skills, interpersonal skills, and professional competence (Finch, Peacock, Levallet, & Foster, 2016).

Some of the approaches to address these employability skills challenge in Asia were found to include the development of soft skills both in individual modules and academic programs (Finch, Hamilton, Riley, & Zehner, 2013). A study in Tanzania produced a different approach on how to solve the shortage of employability skills challenge (Ishengoma, & Vaaland, 2016). The authors recommended a university-industry linkage (UIL) activities that involve student internships and joint projects where industries are involved in the modernizing of university curricula. Other research works find that there is no one-size-fits-all approach as the solution to employability skills challenge (Jackson, 2013; Wickam, 2018). The authors found that solving the problem of lack or shortage of employability skills among job applicants involves all stakeholders. Specifically, Jackson (2013) found that the solution to the problem will require a collaborative strategy. The strategy is that every hand must be on deck involving university curricula that embed employability skills, students' personal efforts to learn and practice, and industry training to ensure good transfer of employability skills.

### **Employability Skills Challenge in Africa**

As found from other continents, in African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, there is a shortage or lack of employability skills among graduates (Ismail, & Mohammed, 2015; Ramcilovic-Suominen, Rodriguez, Puentes, Kirongo, & Pitkänen,

2016). The higher educational models with lack of employability skills include both online and face to face degree programs as found by Sadik (2016) and Chebl and El-Rayess (2017). Some of the specific skills not meeting employers demand are problem solving skills, critical thinking skills among others (Sadik, 2016). An important finding is that African universities like those in other continents have applied several strategies to address employability skills problem (Jackson, 2013; Pitan, & Atiku, 2017).

The authors found some remedial solutions that are useful in addressing the challenge such as career guidance activities, and university-industry collaborative activities. In Nigeria for instance, graduates undergo a compulsory 1-year national youth service corps program, where graduates are deployed to organizations to work for experience (Arubayi, & Akobo, 2017). The authors found that the national youth service corps acts as a useful tool to prepare and develop skills transition and capabilities for employments and job placements. Some criticisms and drawbacks of the national youth service corps program have been that the restricted 4-sector deployment processes limit the thriving of graduate capabilities (Arubayi, & Akobo, 2017).

### **Employability Skills Challenge in Australia**

In Australia, employability skills challenge has been an issue since 1992 leading to the establishment of a government committee charged with addressing the quality assurance of higher education in the continent (Kalfa, & Taksa, 2015). The authors found that there has been a growing concern in business faculties regarding the development of graduates' employability skills. Clarke (2017), explained that a graduate development program was put in place to address the employability skills problem in Australia. The

author asserts that the program has created partial support to graduate skills development and transition to work life. One major limitation of the one year program is that it has created employability focused contracts instead of job security.

Other factors constitute barriers and defy solutions in Australia regarding the handling of employability skills development and applications (Cavanagh, Burston, Southcombe, & Bartram, 2015). Some of the barriers according to the authors include misalignments in understanding and perceptions regarding the relationship that exists between university curricula and skills development. Other factors are a mismatch between the importance of higher order thinking capabilities and work-ready skills (Cavanagh et al., 2015). The resultant effect of these mismatches between universities, students' and employers' perceptions is the lack of proper coordination and embedding of employability skills (Kalfa, & Taksa, 2015).

From the review of the literature in the above continents, it is obvious that employability skills gap, misconceptions, debates, and uncertainties have no simple solution (Blackmore et al., 2016). In the United States, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia, the story seems to be the same. In the following sections, I did a deeper review of the literature regarding acceptable definitions, policies, perceptions, practices, and responses to the employability skills problem. The main focus of this study was the identification of employability skills in holders of online degrees. Most of the previous research work looked at employability skills gap or its identification on a general scale (Artess et al., 2017). Recent debates regarding the employability of online degree holders

call for an investigation into employability skills development and possession by online degree holders.

### **Perspectives of Employability Skills**

#### **Employability Attributes and Skills**

There are different perspectives regarding employability skills attributes that facilitate students' transition from learning to work and job placement (Artess et al., 2017). According to the authors, we can refer to these attributes as capabilities, attitudes, and capacities. Different researchers view these employability attributes from different perspectives (Artess et al., 2017). For instance, Osmani et al. (2015) studied graduate attributes from accounting, computer science, business, and management, with a focus on synthesizing the attributes. Coetzee (2014) took the synthesis further by providing ways of validating and scaling graduate attributes and skills. Kalfa and Taksa (2015), on the other hand, took a critical approach to employability skills perspectives. The authors recommended that instead of focusing on human capital or skills, stakeholders should view employability from the approach of cultural norms and cultural capital. Another perspective is that both dress and appearance are important factors that can aid graduates' transitions into work life (Hooley, & Yates, 2015). To support the focus on dress and appearance, Daniels and Brooker (2014) argued that employability skills should not focus on the teaching of a set of skills but how to build students' identities.

One major advantage of the broader view of employability skills from attributes' point of view is that it enhances the inclusion of a wide range of graduate qualities (Artess et al., 2017). Some of the broad categorizations of the attributes include team-

work, presentation skills, numeracy, language skills, communication skills, and creativity (Artess et al., 2017). Other attributes include an aspiration, critical thinking skills, digital literacy, autonomy, efficiency, emotional intelligence, ethics, and inter-personal skills, among others. There is the challenge of having an agreement on the relevance, level of importance and how a job applicant possess any of these attributes (Cavanagh et al., 2015). Notwithstanding the disagreement on the relevance and other measures of these attributes, there are several frameworks in explaining employability skills. Kumar (2015), Jackson (2014c), and Kalfa and Taksa (2015) developed such frameworks for explaining employability skills.

### **Employability Nontechnical Skills**

Though higher education providers endeavor to embed employability skills into graduates, employers during daily operations claim that graduates lack these non-technical skills (Roepen, 2017). To evaluate these non-technical skills, Braun and Brachen (2015) surveyed 10,000 graduates' applications and interviews. The authors found about 49 generic work related requirements and activities. The non-technical skills include information processing, planning and organizing, foreign language communications, numeracy, and personal performance (Braun et al., 2015). Pollard and Wilson (2014) supported the same view and noted that many employers were not after the skills that higher education providers embed. On the other hand, Morrison (2014) and Roepen (2015) found that graduates did not possess the required confidence to transfer their non-technical skills into the workplace.



On the inability of graduates possessing the necessary confidence to transfer their non-technical skills, Tyrer et al. (2013) found a misalignment between what employers' demand and what higher education providers produce. The misalignment suggests that there is an urgent need to have a common understanding between both parties. To close the misalignment gap, Jackson (2015) recommended the embedding of work related components into the courses such as work placement opportunities. Jackson (2016) went further to explore skills transfer as being a major part of graduates need to join the workplace. Evaluating a total of 674 business graduates, Jackson (2016) found that factors such as learning program, workplace characteristics, and the learner attitude are important to skills transfer. The model of Jackson reveals the importance of approaches to acquiring and transferring skills to involve all stakeholders. In support of the above assertion, Jones (2013) explored accountancy profession employers and found that skills transfer is a continuous process even after securing a job.

### **Employability Specialist Knowledge Skills**

Skipper and Kent (2015) drawing from the field of Psychology, business studies, and creative disciplines, evaluated employability skills could come from a specialist knowledge perspective. The authors used final year students to design, implement, and evaluate the boosting of specialist skills among graduates. The authors' design which also sought to enlighten graduates on job hunting helped both students and employers discover useful specialist skills needed in the workplace. The creative disciplines were found to be more heterogeneous and as well as being precarious and insecure (Skipper et al., 2015). In the same vein, Bridgstock et al. (2015) found that there are values which

graduates can add to the workplace with particular attention to workplace creativity challenges.

In business studies, a work related higher education program made graduates more equipped in the workplace and more competitive during job placement decisions (Clements, & Cord, 2013). It is obvious from the findings that specialist knowledge skills are obtainable through certain professions by using employability skills lens. According to Artess et al. (2017), the British psychology society took a step in this direction and developed serious attention towards psychological literacy development. The authors noted that such program design has brought about the needed graduates' specialist skills in the job market and practice. Other academics may find the model useful and incorporate the same into their teaching areas.

### **Employability Values, Qualities, and Behaviors**

Looking at employability skills cannot be only through the lens of a list of skills (Artess et al., 2017) but rather through approaches such as values, qualities, and behaviors (Greenbank, 2015). The authors argue that group centered discussions can bring a change in behavior. A study on graduates' extra-curricular activities found that transformative pedagogies can aid students' reflection on their values, qualities, and behavior (Greenbank, 2015). The author posits that higher education providers can utilize such transformative pedagogies to enable graduates to evaluate previous behavior and decisions critically. According to the author, such reflections have the capacity of motivating graduates to assess alternative approaches to employability values, behaviors, and quality.

One of the perspectives of employability values, behaviors, and qualities found that there is a relationship between successful job-seeking behaviors, self-control, and self-efficacy (Hazenberg, Seddon, & Denny, 2015). The authors argue that certain *behavioral interventions* can alter the employability skills outcome. For instance, there could be an improvement in self-efficacy through a combination of job placement that goes together with modules undertaken (Hazenberg et al., 2015). Regarding employability value and quality, Turner (2014) argues that higher education providers can support graduates develop self-belief. One of the ways of supporting the graduates to develop self-belief according to the author is by encouraging the students to believe in themselves.

The graduates can be supported to believe that they can improve their ability, achieve their goals and that their environment can support goals achievement (Turner, 2014). The goal of Turner's argument is that higher education providers should seek ways of creating early opportunities to develop self-belief skills for transition into the job market. The challenge here is that there are different terminology applications in describing employability activities (Tate et al., 2015; Tymon, 2013). For instance, as has been stated earlier, some use terms such as hard skills, soft skills, values, attributes, capabilities, competencies, professional skills among others.

### **Employability and Personal Literacy Skills**

There is an argument that one of the ways graduates can enhance their employability is through the articulation of their weaknesses and strengths (Jackson, 2016). According to the author, a sure way of doing such articulation is through personal

literacy or graduates' ability to read oneself. There is an argument in support of personal literacy and self-awareness as important in developing employability skills (Jackson, 2014a). Using data from Australian business graduates, Jackson (2014a) explained that graduates could do self-assessment of their competencies in certain employability skills. Clark and Zukas (2013) went further to buttress the same point by using IT graduates to show how students developed employability skills through social contacts. The authors posited that employability does not only come from educational programs but also from a proper understanding of the workplace where they hope to work.

Another facet of personal literacy skills comes from an awareness of the various cultural and social settings where organizations exist (Lilley, Barker, & Harris, 2015). The cultural and social setting awareness can enhance graduate personal literacy and the development of a global mindset that educational learning may not offer (Lilley et al., 2015). The research of these authors shows that beyond educational learning, graduates can become aware of the cultural and social settings that employers expect from potential employees. Cultural and social learning is not only through the work of higher education providers, but students can learn and educate themselves on such issues. Drayson et al. (2014) took the debate further by explaining that cultural and social awareness and equity are sustainable developments students ought to bring into employment. The authors found that there would be an increase in cultural and social awareness requirements as globalization plays a major role regarding graduate employability.

### **Employability Skills Adaptability**

One of the simplest ways of conceptualizing employability is through career adaptability (Wright, & Frigerio, 2015). The authors argue that the current emphasis on work placement and salaries does not help in the articulation of what resides in the graduate. In their opinion, there could be a measure of career adaptability that further determines graduate employability levels. On ascertaining career adaptability, employers can determine the necessary interventions to harvest graduate potentials. Zacher et al. (2015) went further to explain that higher education providers and employers can help graduates overcome the issue of getting stuck while trying to fulfill their dreams. One way higher education providers can do this is through the development and encouragement of students' curiosity and positive attitude towards change.

Savickas (2013) developed a career construction theory for building employability adaptability. The construction found that self-insight and self-awareness are crucial components of employability (Artess et al., 2017). Using a sample of business study students that were engaged in part time work, Gbadamosi (2015) found that capacity for change belief has an association with self-efficacy. There seems to be a close link between resilience, adaptability, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence (Artess et al., 2017). The overall assertion of these findings is that both higher education providers and employers have a role to play in graduate employability. An important point here is that students have to be shown their role as well on how to adapt to changing scenarios and job opportunities. It is not clear, however, from this literature how employers are to

help potential employees to understand their emotional intelligence when seeking for a job.

### **Recruiters' Demand for Employability Skills**

Recruiter surveys indicate that graduates need to go beyond getting academic certificates to meet the demands of employers in the workplace (Suartha, Suwintana, Sudhana, & Hariyanti, 2017). Workers nowadays are required in addition to specific and basic skills and knowledge to bring on board additional skills set. Employability skills are found to be the missing link between workplace and academic training (Suartha et al., 2017). Recruiters' demand for employability skills varies from nation to nation (Ortiz, Region-Sebest, & MacDemott, 2016; Suartha et al., 2017). In Indonesia for example, recruiters demand skills such as: (a) communication skills; (b) teamwork skills; (c) integrity; (d) intellectual capacity; (e) self-confidence; and (f) personality / individual character.

Other employability skills recruiters demand in Indonesia are (g) planning skills; (h) writing skills; (i) computing skills; and (j) analytical and problem-solving skills (Suartha et al., 2017). In other regions such as the U.S and UK, there are differences and similarities in recruiters' demand for employability skills (Crawford, & Dalton, 2016). Irrespective of the differences and similarities, some skills are found to be the most important (Blackmore et al., 2016). The most important employability skills are listed as problem-solving skills, common communication skills, teamwork skills and personal qualities (Suartha et al., 2017). The recruiters' demand for particular employability skills has brought pressure on higher education providers to seek ways of embedding these

skills into students (Graham, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how recruiters identify these employability skills in online degree holders.

### **Soft Skills**

The use of the term soft-skills has increased tremendously since the 1990s (Bartel, 2018) in job postings, in career advising and business training. According to the author, we can equate soft skills to *people skills* or *interpersonal skills*. While discipline-specific skills are usually content specific, soft skills are found to be non-academic skills (Finch, Hamilton, Riley, & Zehner, 2013). The authors argued that these soft skills are very important across various working environments. Though there is no consensus on the list of soft skills, there are common listings of soft skills (Artess et al., 2017).

Some examples of soft skills include communication skills, decision making skills, teamwork skills, writing skills, speaking skills, and problem solving skills. Bartel (2018) noted other classifications of soft skills. The soft skills are *integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic*. Irrespective of the categorization or classification, educators find it difficult to teach and assess these intangible attributes (Bartel, 2018). It was interesting to review the literature on some of these intangible attributes and soft skills.

**Communication skills.** Effective communication skills are one of the vital skills demanded by employers during job placement and job performance (Ortiz et al., 2016). As the authors found in a 2014 survey of 72 companies in the U.S, employers identified communication skills the most important communication skills for company success. The

communication skills include (a) ability to speak well using the telephone, (b) team communication, (c) proper grammar use, (d) meeting participation, and (e) ability to engage in conversation. Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng and Jerome (2017) on the other hand argued that there is a difference between communication skills and language proficiency. While agreeing to the importance of communication skills, Bharathi (2016) noted the reasons for the high unemployment rate among graduates with such skills. Common among the causes of this high unemployment is inadequate language proficiency, unawareness about life skills and lack of presentation skills knowledge. Clokie and Fourie (2016) went further to suggest that in closing the unemployment gap, course contents should align with specific industry communications skills requirement.

**Decision-making skills.** Decision making skills have been found to carry good influence on graduate employability (Pitan, & Atiku, 2017). The authors used six items to measure decision making skills. The items are (a) self-awareness and (b) self-reflection and assessment of the acquired experience. Other items are (c) continual review and evaluation of opportunities and (d) development of job performance decisions. Blackmore et al. (2016) went further to argue that decision making skills is the same as problem solving skills. As the authors posited, problem solving skills is among the top 3 skills preferred by employers in South Africa, Cambodia, and in the U.S. In agreement with the notion that decision making skills are the same as problem solving skills, Crawford and Dalton (2016) gave details of their components. Employees with problem solving skills are those who can; (a) Identify and analyze problems and (b) candidates that can take effective and appropriate action. Other characteristics of decision making



skills are people that (c) can transfer knowledge across situations, (d) realize the effect of their decisions and finally (e) creative and have innovative solutions.

**Teamwork skills.** Employers and professionals have cited teamwork skills as critical skills for engaging job seekers especially in technically related fields (Thompson, 2017). The characteristics of teamwork skills is that (a) employees are productive as a team member and (b) they are punctual in job performance and meet deadlines (Crawford, & Dalton, 2016). Other characteristics of teamwork skills according to the authors are (c) positive and encouraging attitude, and (d) maintaining accountability to the team. Finally, teamwork skills include (e) working with multiple approaches, (f) sharing ideas to multiple audiences, and (g) awareness and sensitive to diversity. Teamwork skills were found to be the first top preferred skills in Europe, third preferred in South Africa (81%) and second top preferred skill in the UK (85%). While Blackmore et al. (2016) note that teamwork skills can be hard to articulate and assess, Philip et al. (2015) gave a different view. Philip et al. (2015) suggested the contextualization of teamwork skills in an approach that can directly relate to student learning and as well as have a link to future employment.

**Professionalism skills.** Professionalism skills are those attributes that come with business, customer and public relationships in a professional manner (Crawford, & Dalton, 2016). Some of the characteristics of professionalism skills are; (a) effective relationships with customers, businesses and the public, and (b) acceptance of critiquing and direction in the work place. Crawford and Dalton (2016) went further to identify other characteristics of professionalism skills. These characteristics include; (c)

trustworthiness with sensitive information, and (d) understanding roles, realistic career expectations. Finally, professionalism skills entail (e) maintaining appropriate decor and demeanor, (f) selecting mentor and acceptance of advice, and (g) dealing effectively with ambiguity. To develop professionalism skills in graduates, Philip et al. (2015) provided a framework they called “ACT.” The *ACT* represented the components of accountability, communication, and teamwork. The authors found this tagline to have a positive impact on students’ development of professionalism skills.

### **Hard Skills**

Hard skills have been defined as tangible technical and academic skills and are specific, countable, and definable (Sitompul, Kustono, Suhartadi, & Setyaningsih, 2017). Mahmudah (2016) agreed that hard skills are academic skills and went further to recommend that they are pedagogic competence and professional competence. The author also stated that we could improve on hard skills by meeting the pedagogic competence and professional competence. The pedagogic and professional competencies according to the author are the ability to manage to learn students while professional competence refers to the ability to master the learning material.

Mahmudah (2016) further clarified the meaning of hard skills as those skills we can see with eyes, are measurable and assessable. DeLong and Elbeck (2018) differentiated the impacts of soft skills and hard skills on applicants’ job opportunities. The authors argued that soft skills had a significant hierarchical effect above hard skills on a candidate’s likelihood of being called back after the first interview. On the other hand, when a student’s goal is to become an entrepreneur, Riyanti, Sandroto, and

Warmiyati (2016) argued that the focus should be on hard skills' competencies. Another notable difference between hard skills and soft skills is in the area of white/black employees' wage gap (Fan, Wei, & Zhang, 2017).

A study about the U.S employees showed that hard skills and soft skills had a different impact on the wage gap (Fan, Wei, & Zhang, 2017). The authors found the gap in wages to be bigger in soft skills than for hard-skills. Again, on the level of importance stakeholders attach to these skills, there are divergent views (Patacsil, & Tablatin, 2017). According to the authors, while IT students perceive hard skills to be very important, the industry perceive hard skills to be somewhat important. While there are notable differences between hard and soft skills, Balcar (2016) suggested that soft skills have the same productivity as hard skills. The author went further to suggest that hard skills can only be productive when combination with soft skills.

### **Skills Gap**

*The skills gap is a significant gap between an organization's current capabilities and the skills it needs to achieve its goals* (Singh, & Sharma, 2014). The skills gap are found to exist in many industries such as marketing (Ghotbifar, Marjani, & Ramazani, 2017) and renewable energy (Baruah, Ward, Jackson, & Adeyosola, 2018). Other sectors that suffer this skills gap include the aerospace industry and technology industry (Balaraman, & Kamalakannan, 2016). Ford (2018) further suggested that concerning the skills gap; there existed numeracy skill levels of first-generation and multi-generation college graduates in the United States. The author argued that though first-generation

graduates enjoyed the same access to the same labor market outcomes with their multi-generation college graduate peers, they, however, lag in measures of numeracy.

From the renewable sector, Baruah, Ward, Jackson and Adeyosola (2018) found that some factors are responsible for this skills gap. The authors suggested that are differences in skills seeking. For instance, the professional and technical skills distribution indicated that technical-oriented jobs sought for a higher rate of subject-specific knowledge or skills than management-oriented roles. The authors recommended the need for high institutions to revisit their business and program designs. Tulgan (2015) agreed with such recommendation that higher institutions should teach the missing basics to today's young talents. On the other hand, Ghotbifar, Marjani and Ramazani, (2017) suggested that certain environmental factors inhibit the learning and closing of these skills gap. The inhibiting factors according to the authors are social and cultural conditions, technology, religion, and the economy.

### **Acquiring Employability Skills**

#### **Employability Skills and Work Placements**

Most researchers agree that giving students networking and working experience are very important regarding the development of employability skills (Shadbolt, 2016; Wakeham, 2016). The authors argue that long term and short term work experience and training have become employers' important requirement for graduate employment. In Germany for instance, Weiss and Klein (2014) found that voluntary work experience gave students needed the advantage to secure jobs easily than graduates without work experience. The authors went further to explain that work experience and job placement

advantages took place more in relevant fields of study. An important limitation here is that the findings of these authors focused on business studies and not in other disciplines where job experience might not be a priority (Artess et al., 2017). In the work of Binder et al. (2015) who used a robust data sample of 15,000 undergraduate disciplines, the results were in support of work experience. According to the authors, there is a strong effect of work experience on employers' work placement decisions.

Further research regarding the role of work experience and future work place was carried out by Allen et al. (2013). The authors surveyed creative sector students together with higher education providers and employers. The purpose of their research was to evaluate how employers valued work experience of future workers or ideal employable graduates. The researchers found that some factors such as gender, social class, and race played important roles. The authors found that work experience had a dominating influence on work placement decisions. There is another argument by the authors that the gender, race and social class inequalities all reside in the major domain of work experience.

The problem then becomes how to identify ways of countering these inequalities that feature in work experience. Another perspective to work experience as a determinant of work placement is from the research of Jackson (2014). The author used data collected from psychology students that combined their program with work placement. Their investigation covered pre-placement and post-placement attitudes of students and concluded that there is a need for emphasis on students' training. The training according

to the authors will emphasize showing students how they can demonstrate that they have employability skills that employers need.

### **Employability Skills and Graduate Experiences**

Employability skills through graduate experiences are not always incorporated into every academic program across higher institutions (Artess et al., 2017). One of the opportunities to acquire employability skills through graduate experiences is internship programs Helyer and Lee (2014). The authors carried out a study on business study students in England placed on internship schemes. The authors reported positive results from employers, higher education providers, and students regarding transition into employment life. Specifically, the authors argued that students involved in the internship program have transferable skills. The workplace was found to be an ideal setting for developing and articulating employability skills. A debate against the success level of internships is that at times some groups of black minority background are found not to be as successful in securing internship opportunities (Pollard, & Wilson, 2015). Pollard et al. (2015) went further to recommend the need for more research into employers' recruitment and selection processes during internship decisions. According to the authors, such research will help to show whether employers' selection criteria, application process, and assessment criteria inadvertently discriminate against certain applicants.

### **Employability Skills through Extra-Curricular Activities**

The incorporation of some extra-curricular activities such as industry guest speakers has been found to impact positively on graduate employability skills (Reibe et al., 2013). The authors in their extensive research found that when qualified, trained, and

properly briefed guest speakers are involved in addressing students, the results could be great. Some of the results are that students will have exposure to real work experience and there will be the reinforcement of employability value. Roulin and Bangerter (2013b) found a different research outcome regarding the importance of extra-curricular activities as a way of embedding employability skills. The researchers used data from 66 business students who were engaged in internship programs as an extra-curricular activity for transitioning into the labor market. The authors argued that most students' participation in internship programs were for personal reasons and not career related reasons.

Lau et al. (2014) used a large sample size from Taiwan students to evaluate the impact of various extra-curricular activities on students' employability skills development. Some of the extra-curricular activities included sports, students' union membership, art clubs, and music. The authors found that those who engaged in these extra-curricular activities had different positive impacts regarding employability skills. For instance, the authors posited that some students had positive influences on their communication skills, self-promotion skills, leadership skills, and creativity skills. Paine et al. (2013) carried a demographic evaluation of extra-curricular activities and found a weak or zero impact on the labor market and wage progression. The authors evaluated the work entry level and focused on volunteering instead of mandatory internships. While Lau et al. (2014) and Paine et al. (2013) differ on the likely effect of volunteering on employability skills of graduates, a common agreement is that internships have positive impacts (Reibe et al., 2013).

### **Employability Skills through Entrepreneurship**

Much research findings indicate that enterprise education is one of the reliable approaches to prepare students for employment into organizations (Artess et al., 2017). There is strong evidence therefore that a relationship exists between entrepreneurship, enterprise education and employability skills (Hjelde, 2015). The usefulness of entrepreneurial opportunities as ways of developing employability skills is observable in self-employments. Smith and Paton (2014) are of the opinion that entrepreneurialism is rich in transferable skills that can apply to any business. It is by such notions that most governments now promote heavily enterprise education (Pollard, & Wilson, 2014). These assertions summarize that entrepreneurialism is the strength or driving force behind the success of most self-employed businesses. One limitation of the findings is that employability can be limited to self-employment purposes. The papers here did not relate entrepreneurial capacities regarding employability skills within large organizations.

In support of the results of these researches, Moon, Curtis, and Dupernex (2014) recommended that higher education providers need to embed employability skills through entrepreneurial education. Kucel et al. (2016) took the debate further by investigating the assertion that graduates who have entrepreneurial skills have better chances in job placement decisions across nations. The authors found that better utilization of entrepreneurial skills has a close link with innovative labor markets. One issue here is that policy makers may be demanding too much from higher education providers (Henry, 2013) in the implementation of entrepreneurial education. Henry argues that there is the possibility of a shift in focus from competency for every graduate to competitiveness



within the economy. Irrespective of policy impact, there is a consensus that higher education providers need to establish closer relationships with employers in building employability skills among graduates (Henry, 2013; Kucel et al., 2016). Another aspect is a careful identification of ways of impacting long term employability skills in graduates (Henry, 2013).

### **Employability Skills and Internationalization**

Internationalization and international mobility have been found to positively impact on graduates' employability skills (Artess et al., 2017). According to the authors, students' mobility refers to the provision of programs to the home country and overseas students to enable them to learn across nations. It is described as inward mobility when the program is designed to educate international students and outward mobility when the programs at home educate home country students (Artess et al., 2017). For instance, through student mobility programs, graduates can gain second language skills which have employers' high regard (Jones, 2013). The author argued that the development of skills such as personal effectiveness, self-efficacy, and self-sufficiency could be through learning abroad. One important aspect is that transferable and generic skills that employers seek for can be developed through international learning opportunities (Jones, 2013).

O'Mahony (2014) brought a new perspective regarding the evaluation of graduate employability skills in the aspect of transnational education. The author explained that transnational education is an education system where learners are in countries different from the country location of the institution providing the education. The transnational

education is a practical model of online learning found to develop transferable employability skills (O'Mahony, 2014; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2015). The focus of O'Mahony (2014) research was on the enhancement of employability skills within higher institutions in the UK. Though the author found evidence of employability skills development in transnational education, there was the rare embedding of transferable skills within the curriculum. The areas for embedding transferable employability skills came through employer interaction, careers advice, and helping with CV writing (Mellors-Bourne, Hooley, & Marriott, 2015). One strong support of embedding of transferable employability skills in transnational education according to the author came from the fact that most of the students were already employed. One limitation of the research seems to come from the fact that the research did not explain the development of transferable skills identified in potential employees.

### **Employability Skills Strategy by Higher Institutions**

#### **Employability Skills and Institutional Lens**

There are different institutional views and approaches in embedding employability skills in graduates (Artess et al., 2017; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013a). Some of the strategies according to the authors include program mix, structural approaches, networking, curriculum development, and extra-curricular provisions. One clear point is that higher education providers differ in their approaches regarding the embedding of employability skills (Lee, & Chung, 2015). The authors argue that certain features regarding the structural organization of higher education providers influence

employability. In Vietnam for instance, the structural organization of higher institutions that involved under-resourcing had a negative impact on employability (Tran, 2015).

There are other major influencing factors regarding the differences in the approach of higher education providers towards embedding employability. The Higher Education Academy (2015) found these factors to include culture, resourcing, and pedagogies. An example according to the authors is that in some instances, elite higher institutions use different pedagogies to prepare students for elite jobs. It is not clear here what the authors meant by elite institutions or how one can recognize elite pedagogies. For instance, there is no clarity regarding what constitutes elite jobs and how to differentiate such jobs from other job placements.

### **Employability Skills Pedagogies**

An important component of employability skills strategies by high education providers is the pedagogy adoption in running academic programs. These teaching and learning approaches can support or inhibit the students' ability to acquire needed employability skills (Artess et al., 2017). For instance, a constructivist pedagogy was found to support students' development of employability skills (Rutt et al., 2013). According to the authors, some of the features of the constructivists' pedagogies include stressing active learning, social interaction, and participation. Kumar (2015) developed a model of teaching and impacting employability skills. She described the model as strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (SOAR). The model encourages the embedding of employability skills into specific courses, vocational programs, and occupation.

Teal (2013) took the evaluation of approaches to employability skills deeper and made specific findings on financial planning degrees. The author found that transition into the workplace was smoother through the integration of the university and the profession. Thorley (2014) argue that in the approach to employability in the music technology degrees, students encounter challenges in getting into the competitive and fragmented industry. Thorley however, found that musical technology students understood the needed experience, skills and knowledge that employers require. Regarding employability orientation in various disciplines, Grotkowska, Wincenciak, and Gajderowicz (2015) argue that there are strong disciplinary differences. Such a position agrees with what has noted earlier that employability skills embedment has different lens higher education programs can use.

### **Employability Skills and Curriculum Development**

Employability skills development can be through the strategy of changing the present curriculum. The change in the curriculum could be in the form of introducing employability modules that support students (Pegg, & Caddell, 2016). There are some useful frameworks regarding process developments that institutions can adopt (Cole, & Tibby, 2013; Kumar, 2015). Pegg and Caddell (2016) used a five-year data from a Scotland higher institutions' internship program to analyze the policy and experiences from internships. The areas of focus included a spatial arena, conceptual space and physical spaces where decisions, policies, and education occur. The authors found that there is a shift in higher education policy and funding regarding internships which impact on students' employability. The findings of Hill, Walkington, and France (2016) is in

support of the above results. The authors argue that one way that higher institutions embed employability is through alignment of graduate attributes and curriculum learning outcomes.

On the other hand, Byrom and Alken (2014) recommended a complementary and alternative approach to the issue of embedding employability skills. According to the authors, one alternative is by focusing on the introduction of various work-related curriculum features. Other authors assert that applying various approaches is the key to embedding employability skills into the academic curriculum (Kettis et al., 2013; Smith, & Worsfold, 2014; Wilton, 2014). It is clear from these findings that there is no one particular way to embed employability skills into the graduate. There is a need to understand what employers expect and tailor any approach to enable graduates to realize employers' expectations. One limitation of the various approaches remains the fact that employability skills lack a uniform consensus.

### **Employability Skills and Stakeholders Engagement**

Higher education providers can involve external stakeholders developing graduates' employability through networking (Blackmore et al., 2016). Artess et al. (2017) went a step further and described the involvement of external stakeholders as employability skills networking strategy. For instance, Drange, Bernstrom, and Mamelund (2018) investigated how the involvement of various stakeholders gave support to graduate skills development. Using data from Norway, the authors argue that through the involvement of stakeholders, there was better competence development. Another

benefit according to the authors is job-skills match regarding the sustenance of employment.

Cole and Tibby (2013) went deeper in analyzing the involvement of stakeholders in the development of employability skills by higher education providers. The authors recommended that it is important to identify the relevant stakeholders in a particular employability development program. Such stakeholders may have different expectations and contributions from what other stakeholders in other programs can contribute (Cole, & Tibby, 2013). Another argument according to the authors is that higher education providers can find out areas of collaboration with stakeholders. Shadbolt (2016) and Wakeham (2016) agreed to a collaboration with stakeholders and found that graduate work experience is an area to achieve such collaboration. Such work experience could be through voluntary work experience (Weiss, & Klein, 2014). Another area of such collaborations include internships according to Heyler, and Lee (2014) which the authors argue can produce employability skills development.

### **Identifying Employability Skills in Online Degrees**

The employability skills debate has become more intense with the increasing explosion of online education model (Dowling, & Wilson, 2017; Fitó, Martínez, & Moya, 2014). The arguments and debates regarding employability skills of online degree holders have become a global issue (Blackmore et al., 2016). In Europe, the United States, Africa, Australia, Asia, etc. much research has been carried out in this regard (Adams, 2016; Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017; Sadik, 2016). Some of the research investigations narrow the issue down to program types, pedagogy, and quality of online degrees (Sadik,

2016). The purpose of this research was to close a gap in the literature regarding how those who hired face to face and online degree holders identified their employability skills. This section of the literature review focused on the employability skills of online degree holders.

### **Recruiters' Perception of Online Degree Employability Skills**

Most research regarding employability skills of online degree holders focuses on perceptions of employers' and students (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017; Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014; Grossman, & Johnson, 2016). There is a consensus that the perceptions of employers play a strong role in how the labor market view the employability competencies of graduates (Cai, 2014). There is, however, chances that employers' views may be wrong at times particularly when dealing with graduates from cultures and backgrounds that employers are unfamiliar with (Cai, 2014). Some authors argue that online degrees are acceptable in hiring decisions while others indicate low or poor acceptability (James, Larry, & Terry, 2015; Roberto, & Johnson, 2017). Research carried out by Fitó, Martínez, and Moya (2014) found mixed results. The authors through employers investigated the competency profile of online business management and administration graduates. Their results indicated that online degree holders have positive employability skills and higher competencies in the areas of time management and information management (Fitó, Martínez, & Moya, 2014).

The authors also found that online degree holders had higher competencies in information search and using industrial and commercial training. On the other hand, online graduates had equal and sometimes lower employability skills in leadership and

teamwork (Fitó, Martínez, & Moya, 2014). Fogle and Elliot (2013) posit that it is possible to overcome employers' perception of poor leadership and teamwork employability skills. The authors noted that online graduates could demonstrate leadership and teamwork skills through the competences they gained from collaborative projects and volunteer work. One important fact the authors noted is that students had a negative perception of how the labor market would accept their degrees. The authors argued that the result was contrary to such students' negative views as employers had positive acceptability of their degrees. The weakness of the research may be the fact that most participants were mere potential employers and not with organizations that have online degree holders in their employment.

Adams (2016) found a different result regarding the employability of online degree holders after interviewing 2,187 high school principals in the United States as hiring managers. The author argued that online degree holders had low employability rating following their personal experience, institution type, and interaction benefits. The researcher did not focus on the employability skills that online degree holders possess, but on a comparison of online and traditional degree types. A different result came from the Arab world where employers assert that online degree holders have an advantage over other degree types (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017). According to the authors, academic library employers indicated that online degree holders could demonstrate better communication skills.

Another area of positive evaluation of online degree holders was in the aspect of better networking with information professionals (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017). It is



evident, therefore, that at least few researchers found employability skills among online degree holders. The gap in literature remains the fact that most researchers carried out their investigation from employers' perception and not from their practical experiences with online degree holders. In this study, I sought to close that gap in the literature and investigated how those who employed online degree holders identified the relevant employability skills either at the entry level or during job performance. On the other hand, I also investigated how employers identified the absence of employability skills in holders of online degrees. Perceptions of employers are not enough measures of employability skills (Wilton, 2014). One way to secure a reliable result came from HR experts sharing their experiences with online degree holders in their employ.

### **Employability Skills and Recruitment Decisions**

One difficulty regarding graduate employability skills is that some recruitment decisions depend on other factors besides skills from academic institutions (Sin, & Neave, 2016; Wilton, 2014). Some employers look for certain attributes that students may not acquire from academic training such as individual maturity, personal ambition, and motivation (Wilton, 2014). There are other employment and promotion factors such as person-organization-fit or person-job fit that determine the acceptance of a job seeker (Wilton, 2014). As the author found, such skills may be organization specific or function specific. The insight the author brought into the debate is that recruitment processes are complex and goes beyond what higher institutions can embed. The next section of the literature review focused on the gaps in the literature, literature related to other methodologies and summary and conclusions.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

The findings of this study differed with previous studies in some of the results while extending and agreeing with other studies in other results. The study produced four major findings. Finding 1 is the possession of relevant skills by online degree holders, finding 2, degree type, does not form the determinant factor in recruitment. Finding 3, the discovery strategies, and finding 4, going beyond mere perception. Theme 1 has three aspects which confirmed and extended research findings in the literature. The first aspect is (a) the discovery, and (b) relevant skills, and (c) going beyond mere perception. The three aspects are closely linked and provide a useful aid to evaluate online degree holders during recruitment and promotion decisions.

**Discovery.** The discovery of relevant skills in online degree holders by participants in this study agrees and extends the findings of a previous research study in the European region by Fitó, Martínez and Moya (2014). Fitó, Martínez and Moya (2014) who studied online BMA graduates in Europe revealed that recruiters discovered that online degree holders reached better competency levels. Again, while prior studies focused on the comparison of acceptability of online degrees versus face to face degrees (Adams, 2016; Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017), this study went further to reveal the employability skills discovery strategies of recruiters who already employed holders of online degrees in their organizations. For example, Adams (2016) interviewed 2,187 high school principals in the United States to compare acceptability of online degrees as against face to face degrees. The author only showed the factors that led to poor online degree acceptability such as personal experience, institution type, and interaction

benefits. This study went beyond such comparison of degree type acceptability and showed lived experiences of recruiters' discovery of employability skills in online degree holders.

**Relevant skills.** The experience of 80% of the study participants in finding relevant skills in online degree holders during and after recruitment decisions agree with the study of Fitó, Martínez and Moya (2014). Fitó, Martínez and Moya (2014) found in online degree holders such relevant skills as time management and information management skills; their result came from a narrowed focus of online business management and administration (BMA) graduates. The relevant skills found by 80% of the participants in this study covered a broad range of skills set found in 10 different sectors and industries. Such broad coverage extended and expanded research findings on employability skills set found in online degree holders.

**Mere perception.** The results of this study differed from some research works on employability skills of online degree holders Erden and Tekarslan (2014). The findings of this study came from recruiters' practical experiences with employed online degree holders. Studies of 24 HR specialists from Istanbul (Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014) focused on perceptions of HR experts and comparison of online and face to face degree holders. Studies of HR experts in Kentucky (Grossman, & Johnson, 2017) and Arab (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017) noted the theme of HR perception.

The perceptions of employers play a strong role in how the labor market view the employability competencies of graduates (Cai, 2014). There is, however, chances that employers' views may be wrong at times particularly when dealing with graduates from

cultures and backgrounds that employers are unfamiliar with (Cai, 2014). The result of this study has proved that mere perception is not enough basis for judging the quality of online degrees. The discovery of employability skills in all the holders of online degrees in these organizations by Nigerian recruiters in this study has proved mere negative perceptions wrong.

**Hard skills shortage.** The result of a shortage of hard skills from this study agreed and extended the results of the previous study by Balaraman and Kamalakannan (2016) on hard skills shortage in the Indian aerospace. Balaraman and Kamalakannan (2016) found hard skills shortage in (a) Basic and fundamental technical theories, (b) technical and practical skills, and (c) Inspection and Maintenance of equipment, (p. 126). Participants from the medical and aviation sector echoed the lack of these hard skills in online degree holders. The participants' affirmed that they would not hire for instance online degree holder to pilot an aircraft without practical experience.

Again, participants from the health sector echoed a similar position that medical practice recruitment decision may not consider a job applicant with an online degree in medicine without practical experience. However, a prior research in Nigeria on online nursing degree holders from National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) by Ofoha and Iwuchukwu (2018) found a divergent result. The authors traced NOUN nursing graduates to their places of work to ascertain their level of professional competency and to explore employers' expectation of graduate competencies. The results indicate that online nursing graduates possess high level of professional competence and also met and at times exceeded employers' expectations. The study of hard skills shortage in Indonesia by

Sitompul, Kustono, Suhartadi and Setyaningsih (2017) explained that recruiters see hard skills as tangible and technical skills and are specific, countable, and definable that requires practical demonstration.

**Does not form the determinant factor.** The theme that degree type does not form the determinant factor agrees with the study on library science employers from Arab by Chebl & El Rayess (2017). According to the authors, degree type does not determine the possession or superiority of employability skills. The authors found that academic library employers indicated that online degree holders could demonstrate better communication skills more than face to face degree holders. The theme equally extended the study on HR experts from Kentucky by Grossman and Johnson (2017) that degree type does not form the determinant factor in recruitment decisions. The participants' response that degree type does not form the basis of their recruitment and promotion decision supports is a new insight in Nigeria in particular. The findings of this study somehow disconfirm the earlier finding of Agbebaku and Adavbiele (2016). Agbebaku and Adavbiele (2016) found a low rating of online degree type from the lens of reliability and legality of online education. The result of this study from investigating the practical encounters of recruiters who have already employed online degree holders disproved the findings of Agbebaku and Adavbiele (2016).

**Generates bias in recruitment.** The theme of bias generation in recruitment agreed with the work of Grossman and Johnson (2017). The authors found that some HR managers hold preconceived ideas about an applicant's degree type. The participants in this study equally echoed similar views that when they find that a degree was from an

online education platform, it creates some bias because of their preconceived notions from negative publicity. However, as the study has shown, those online degree holders already working with research participants have proved such bias and perceptions wrong. In recommending ways recruiters can handle this bias on online degree type, Cai (2013) recommended that employers ought to base employability skills search on a thorough investigation of the employee's overall background.

**Soft skills.** The study findings of soft skills in online degree holders confirmed other research results in the literature. In Arab, Chebl and El Rayess (2017) found better communications skills and better networking with information professionals in online degree holders. In Europe, the study of Fitó, Martínez and Moya (2014) found employability skills in holders of online degrees such as leadership and teamwork skills. It is important to note that while Fitó, Martínez and Moya (2014) focused only on BMA graduates in Europe, Chebl and El Rayess (2017) focused on academic library employers. The results of this study extended the possession of soft skills by online degree holders in different sectors. The study covered ten different sectors in Nigeria and provided more robust skills set found in online degree holders.

**Hard skills.** The theme of discovering hard skills in online degree holders extended other research studies by Fan, Wei and Zhang (2017), Mahmudah (2016) and Sitompul, Kustono, Suhartadi and Setyaningsih (2017). In their study about hard skills in the United States, Fan, Wei and Zhang (2017) categorized hard skills into (a) Science, and (b) Mathematics. Other categorizations are (c) Technological design skills, and (d) Analyzing data or information in the work activities category (p. 1037). The hard skills

found by participants in this study echoed the same categorization by Fan, Wei and Zhang (2017). Mahmudah (2016) described hard skills as tangible technical and academic skills which are specific, countable, and definable. They equally agreed that hard skills are academic skills and went further to recommend that they are pedagogic competence and professional competence.

In this study, the participants explained the hard skills they saw in online degree holders who are working in their organizations. This study results showed that online degree holders possessed data analysis skills and engineering skills in line with Fan, Wei and Zhang (2017) categorization. Other hard skills found by study participants include systems and process development skills, solving technical problem skills and computer literacy skills. There is a difference between hard skills shortage as explained by participants in the aviation industry and hard skills found by employers in other sectors (Patacsil, & Tablatin, 2017). Patacsil and Tablatin (2017) confirmed the divergent views and different categorizations employers and stakeholders give to different hard skills.

**Face-to-face interviews.** This theme extended the results of the study of job postings in the U.S labor market by Deterding and Pedulla (2016). Deterding and Pedulla (2016) found that “*employers use credentials to screen and filter candidates in the process of probabilistic assessments of workers’ future performance, given that they are unable to observe future productivity (p. 157) directly.*” In this study, participants explained how they got their insight into the employability skills of online degree holders through face to face interviews and screenings. This theme agreed with the conceptual framework of schooling and recruitment used in this study (Bills, 2003). The results of

this study also extend the study of Gaskell and Mills (2014). Gaskell and Mills (2014) explained that face to face screening and interviews are some of the ways to understand how online higher institutions change people who are without physical interaction or have limited physical interaction.

**Technology based recruitment strategies.** This theme confirms earlier research results of Mohapatra and Sahu (2017) on the emerging trend in recruitments. Mohapatra and Sahu (2017) researched on optimizing the recruitment funnel in an ITES Company at Gurgaon in the Indian branch of a US based SaaS Company spread across 9 locations worldwide. They found that analytics is very useful for recruiters to have a deeper knowledge of the employability skills of job candidates (p. 713). Data analytics equally help recruiters understand whether job applicants can be a right fit into their organizations (Mohapatra, & Sahu, 2017). They found the theme of technology based recruitment strategy such as data analytics as one of the trending and useful tools in identifying employability skills. The authors found that there could be some challenges in the operational efficiency of using analytics in recruitment. HR experts nonetheless need to go ahead and use the method as some of the benefits is that it can remove the disadvantages of the traditional interviewing method.

**Short-term job placement.** The result of this research extended the study of Pegg and Caddell (2016) in Scotland which confirmed the usefulness of short term job placement to identify employability skills in job seekers from higher institutions. The authors found that short term job placements or internships make it easy for employers to have firsthand experience regarding the capabilities of employees. The strategy can



equally be useful in bringing out the best from a fresher that require a little push to release employability potentials. Other authors (Artess et al., 2017) found the theme of the usefulness of short term job placement in their study. The authors found that the involvement of external stakeholders as employability skills networking strategy to be one of the ways to discover employability skills. In Norway, Drange, Bernstrom and Mamelund (2018) discovered that the engagement of job applicants gave support to graduate skills discovery.

**Through curriculum vitae.** Theme 1 has three aspects which confirmed and extended research findings in the literature. The first aspect is (a) resume content, and (b) practical experience, and (c) skills demonstration. The three aspects are closely linked and provide useful information as to why a job applicant may not be accepted or staff not being promoted.

**Resume content.** The discovery of job applicants missing a job or promotion opportunity because of poor resume content parallels and extends the results of the research of Kavar, Dunbar, and Scruth (2017), Smith, Flannery, and Winstaed (2014), and Jonte, Doutre, and Sarnin (2016). Just as the participants from the health and aviation sectors noted the role of resume, Smith et al. explained some resume contents that attract employers and promotion opportunities in pharmacy and medical fields. These resume contents depending on the track of each will include education and training, licensure and certifications, and honors and awards. Other resume contents are professional employments, presentations, research, professional affiliations and activities, publications, teaching experience, and rotations (p. 2115-2117). As some of the

participants explained, while degree type is not the determinant factor, resume content should attract a recruiter.

***Practical experience.*** The participants provided information about the lack of practical experience by job applicants from both online and face to face degree type graduates. Jonte et al. (2016) concluded that the inability of job seekers and employees to convince recruiters of their practical job experience could lead to missing opportunities. Smith et al. (2014) found that professionals need to continuously update their practical job experience to satisfy recruiters demand job placement and promotion decisions. As participants in this study stated, practical experiences are required by recruiters in technical skills, and without practical experiences, such applicants and employees may not have the job opportunity.

***Skills demonstration.*** The results from the study agreed with the research of Jackson (2016). The author found that job applicants should be able to demonstrate the ability to transfer skills from the university into the work place. The participants in this study found that for fresh graduates, while they have much theoretical knowledge, they often failed to demonstrate the skills they claimed to have during interviews. Communication and leadership skill are some the areas of skills gap (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017). Fogle and Elliot (2013) noted that online graduates could demonstrate leadership and teamwork skills through the competences they gained from collaborative projects and volunteer work.

***Failure to answer interview questions.*** The theme paralleled the results of the study of Van De Mieroop (2018). The study participants' experiences that in some cases,

applicants could not give satisfactory answers according to Van De Mieroop (2018). The author found that job applicants or staff for promotion may miss a recruiter's question when they feel that their identity as a good candidate is threatened. Van De Mieroop (2018) went further to note that at times, it may be as a result of their answers to the recruiter's questions were not treated as satisfactory or negative elements in their CVs. Koivunen, Ylöstalo and Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta (2015) puts it this way: "It's typical that the job seeker, when you ask s/he about things, answers from her/his point of view and how s/he saw events." Participants in the study found that some of those who were unsuccessful answered from their perspectives and not what the recruiter wants.

There are gaps in the literature concerning recruiters' experience in identifying employability skills of online degree holders both in settings, methods, and scope. Previous research focused on the perceptions of employers regarding online degrees (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017; Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014; Grossman, & Johnson, 2016). The gap in the literature becomes wider as other studies made use of the quantitative approach to compare acceptability of face to face degrees with online degrees (Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014). There is no known study with setting and focus on how recruiters identified employability skills in online degree holders during recruitment and promotion decisions. Other studies majored on recruiters' positive evaluations and acceptability of online degrees in hiring decisions (Deaconu, et al., 2014; Fogle, & Elliot, 2013; James, Larry, & Terry, 2015). Despite ample research on perceptions, acceptability or rejection of online degrees, this study filled the gap in the literature as it revealed the relevant employability skills found in online degree holders (Figure 2).

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify employability skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions. The gap in the literature led to the use of Cole and Tibby (2013) employability conceptual framework with four components. The components are a sound understanding of employability skills, which requires stakeholders to define and create employability skills that integrate the views of other stakeholders. The second component of the framework is developing employability skills models, (Cole, & Tibby, 2013). There is also the sharing and enhancing existing skills practices, and the fourth framework is measuring and reviewing employability skills practices (Cole, & Tibby, 2013).

The data I collected, hopefully closed the gap from 20 HR professionals in Nigerian private and public organizations. The HR professionals were recruiters with at least five years' experience in recruiting or promoting online degree holders. The data I collected produced results that could lead to understanding how HR professionals identified employability skills in online degree holders. Blackmore et al. (2016) explained that higher education providers could involve external stakeholders to develop graduates' employability skills through networking. Artess et al. (2017) went further to describe networking strategy as one of the involvements of external stakeholders to develop employability skills. For instance, Drange, Bernstrom and Mamelund (2018) investigated how the involvement of various stakeholders gave support to graduate skills development. Employability skills development activities are outside the scope of this

study. Other researchers may wish to carry out a study on employability skills development.

Previous research works indicated the lack of agreement regarding the possession of employability skills among online degree holders (Deaconu, et al., 2014; Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014). It is clear that many researchers have investigated the quality of online degrees, but there is no research yet on how HR professionals in Nigeria identify employability skills in online degree holders. Also, separately or collectively, previous studies did not provide an answer to the research question: How do HR managers identify the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online degrees during job placement and promotion decisions?

#### **Literature Related to other Methodologies**

DePriest and Absher (2013) evaluated academic administrators' acceptability of faculty with online degrees in the United States. The authors surveyed 208 participants involved in hiring decisions using quantitative and stratified sampling approach. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify employability skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions. The study was not intended to compare acceptability of online degrees versus traditional degrees in hiring decision. This study was an exploratory case study hence the choice of a qualitative research method (Yin, 2014). Fogle and Elliot (2013) compared hiring managers' favorable attitudes towards online degree graduates with that of traditional degree holders using a Likert scale to administer questionnaires to

62 hiring managers. Since this study was not intended to compare variables as Fogle and Elliot (2013) did, I employed a qualitative exploratory case study design.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identified employability skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions. I began this chapter with an overview of the employability skills challenges across different continents of the world. I reviewed the employability skills embedment strategies and employability skills challenges both in traditional and online degrees. I went to provide the context of this study on how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify employability skills in online degree holders during employment decisions. Cole and Tibby (2013) evaluated the employability skills framework from the stakeholders' perspective. There are four components of the employability skills conceptual framework. The importance of these four components of the employability skills conceptual framework may enhance contextual assessment regarding the clearer understanding of online degree holders' employability skills. The application of Cole and Tibby (2013) conceptual framework will form the guide to this study in chapter 3.

The assumption in this study was that knowing how recruiters identified employability skills in online degree holders could encourage further developments in online higher education. Such knowledge can embolden more online students and working class groups to be better prepared to showcase their employability skills. Understanding how to identify employability skills in online degree holders can enable

recruiters to move beyond mere perception and become more engaged in recruiting decisions. The theme I used in the literature review supported these assumptions. As observed by James, Larry and Terry (2015), Fogle and Elliot (2013), Deaconu, Osoian, Zaharie and Achim (2014), there exists a research gap regarding how recruiters identify employability skills in online degree holders. I did a review in the background of the study regarding how recruiters identify employability skills in degree holders and promotion decisions. I provided the research methodology for this study in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

I used a qualitative, case study approach to collect rich data and fulfill the purpose of the study. The purpose of this study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify employability skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions. I used semistructured interviewing, which enabled me to have wide coverage of experiences of those who employed online degree holders (Geddes, Parker, & Scott, 2018). The results of this study provided an understanding of the various strategies recruiters in Nigeria use to identify the presence or absence of employability skills in online degree holders during employment and promotion decisions.

Chapter 3 includes discussions regarding research methodology, study design and how it aligns with the problem statement, the purpose statement, and the research question. The next sections of the chapter are focused on the research approach, research design, and the analysis of the role of the researcher. Further discussions in this chapter address the logical basis for selecting research participants, instrumentation, recruitment procedures, participation and data collection. I conclude the chapter with explanations regarding issues of trustworthiness and ethics in conducting the research.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research design for this study was an exploratory case study. An exploratory case study design enables researchers to investigate management issues (Masud, 2018). I used an exploratory case study design approach because of the research question: How do HR managers identify the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online



degrees during job placement decisions? The research question reflected the problem I explored. The research question also provided the framework that helped organize the study. The research question enhanced the direction, relevance, and coherence during this study.

### **Research Design**

There are several types of qualitative research designs: (a) case study, (b) phenomenology, (c) heuristic, (d) grounded theory, (e) narrative, (f) ethnography, and (g) content analysis (Marshall, & Rossman, 2014). A phenomenological design is used to describe research participants' life experiences (Wagstaff, & Williams, 2014), so I did not choose it because I did not investigate participants' lived experiences. I also did not choose an ethnographic design because it is more appropriate when the research is focused on culture or a group that shares common behaviors and beliefs within a specific period to gather results on cultural activities (Van Maanen, 2015). I also did not choose a narrative research design because it is more appropriate when a study involves participants' storytelling in a readable form (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Morse, 2015). Another research design that was not appropriate for this study is grounded theory, which is used for the development of theory through the discovery of patterns (Engward, 2013) and is more appropriate when the researcher intends to produce a theory regarding the experience of participants or an event (Boadu, & Sorour, 2015). Further, content analysis is more suitable for analyzing newspapers, examination of communication and website exploration (Elo et al., 2014). Finally, a heuristic research design is applicable when the researcher is studying the lived experience of participants (Howard, & Hirani,

2013). However, I chose a case study design for exploring employability skills of online degrees as the most suitable approach (Yin, 2014).

Applying a qualitative case study design enabled me to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify the presence or absence of employability skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions. I included 20 HR directors and heads of HR departments from various sectors in Nigeria. The sectors included banking, government, education, aviation, telecommunications, transport, health, finance, oil and gas, and consulting outfits. These participants have accepted online degree holders into their workforce. The research covered sectors that accept online degree holders into their workforces such as banks, oil and gas, and Nigerian government employers. The study covered employment entry point for job applicants with online degrees and promotion of existing workforce with online degrees. My focus was to explore the research problem and not the generalization of research findings.

### **Research Rationale**

There are five components of a case study that help cover the depth of scholarship in exploratory research: developing a question, building propositions, identifying units of analysis, linking of data with propositions, and interpreting the findings. Further, exploratory research questions should include terms such as *how*, *what*, or *why* (Peltokorpi, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify the presence or absence of employability skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions.

Using an exploratory case study allowed me to have an in-depth description of the themes in the literature review and the approach of inquiring regarding data collection. In this study, there was a need for an in-depth understanding of HR managers' decisions during recruitment and promotion, especially how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify the presence or absence of employability skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions. I used the exploratory case study to guide the development of the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework guided the development of interview questions that brought data to answer the research question.

I recorded semistructured interviews with the aid of an audio recorder and transcribed the interviews. I recorded and collated codes into useful themes from the interviews. There was a follow-up explanation that served as useful criteria for the interpretation of findings that led to stronger results (see Schwandt, 2015). I recruited 20 heads of HR departments who take employment and promotion decisions. I used purposeful sampling in the private and public sectors within Nigeria to explore how they identify employability skills in employment decisions. I asked open-ended questions during semistructured interviews. On completion of the semistructured interviews, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews for further clarifications and examinations.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and exploration in a qualitative study (Yin, 2013). In this study, I was the primary instrument of data collection, which I collected with semistructured, face-to-face interviews. One of the factors that may affect this study's trustworthiness was when I as the researcher doubled

as the instrument of data collection (Cunliffe, & Karunanayake, 2013). Other elements that contribute to biases when collecting data include beliefs, personal values, exposure to participants and demographic paradigms (Cunliffe, & Karunanayake, 2013). In this study, I did not have any personal, organizational, or academic relationship with the HR managers in the chosen population of participants. Further, to enhance the dependability of the semistructured interviews, I used an interview protocol, which helped mitigate unplanned problems. The interview protocol also guaranteed consistency within the interview stages. I used an audio recorder to record the interviews and further transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim for coding.

The role of the researcher can also be a teacher, evaluator, advocate, and biographer as well as the one who interprets the collected data through documents, interviews, and observation (Ridder, 2017). Other roles of the researcher include mentoring and modeling (Browning, Thompson, & Dawson, 2014). My role during the study as the sole instrument comprised of data collection, analysis, and data interpretation. As a researcher, I was responsible for interpreting collected data and as well as providing quality assurance of the study (Collins, & Cooper, 2014). To maintain professionalism when interviewing participants and avoid bias, I maintained a balance between my involvements in the case study and acting as an expert regarding revealed knowledge from the case study (Ridder, 2017).

### **Methodology**

The research methodology was a qualitative research method, which was appropriate for the study because I used a case study design (Yin, 2014). Qualitative

research deals with human encounters as it concerns the expectations and quality of outcomes of the study and what such outcomes could represent to the users of research (Ineson, 2014). When exploring a human issue in a real-world situation, researchers adopt a qualitative research approach to investigate how and why the issue occurs (Yin, 2014). Further, qualitative research questions provide answers for the *what*, *how* and *why* types of research questions (Yin, 2014). In this study, I sought to investigate the how of identifying employability skills in holders of online degrees.

A quantitative research method was not appropriate for this study because it deals with statistical data analysis (Yin, 2014). I did not need statistical analysis in measuring or interpreting the collected data. A quantitative research method may have also required the collection of data through surveys administered on research participants (Ineson, 2014). In this study, the qualitative research method gave meaning to the collected data for the findings.

As a qualitative researcher in this study, I was the primary data collection instrument and I used a personal lens for data collection and data exploration (Peredaryenko, & Krauss, 2013). I collected data with semistructured, face-to-face interviews with 20 HR directors and managers in various industries and government employers in Nigeria. I recruited through purposeful sampling participants from the CIPMN, whose members are responsible for recruitment, employment, and promotion decisions in their various industries and sectors.

### **Research Participant Selection Logic**

Purposeful sampling is the nonrandom process of selecting members in a case based on participants' experience, knowledge, and work status (Sharafizad, & Coetzer, 2016). Purposeful sampling enhances the engagement of participants with varied views of the research and proficiency of the study's subject matter (Sharafizad, & Coetzer, 2016). Thus, I used purposeful sampling to select 20 HR managers and directors who employed holders of online degrees and have experienced these employees' job performance skills. I selected directors and managers who presently have online degree holders as part of the workforce in their various establishments. I selected 2 participants from 10 sectors covering government and nongovernmental organizations, which allowed for information-rich cases that illuminated the question under review and produced in-depth understanding and insights into the case. The results are also free from the production of empirical generalizations (Patton, 2014).

There were specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to select participants in this study. The sample population inclusion criteria was (a) HR managers with no fewer than 5 years of experience in hiring decisions of online degree holders and (b) hiring professionals who have 5 years of experience regarding job performance skills of online degree holders. The participants were those with experience and were able and willing to provide in-depth information regarding the phenomenon of this study (Patton, 2014). The choice of 5 years' experience in hiring decisions provided time for employers to have established strategies for identifying employability skills in online degree holders. Exclusion criterion included employers who have not employed or worked with online

degree holders. These selection criteria distinguished employers who have the strategies for identifying employability skills in online degree holders from other employers who lack these experiences (Cai, 2014).

I approached members of the CIPMN with the inclusion and exclusion criteria as a guiding set for recruiting study participants. I scheduled semistructured interviews as per each individuals' chosen date and time. I used a safe, respectful, kind, and friendly approach to interview the participants (Adams, & Miles, 2013). Five participants' interviews took place in Lagos, Nigeria at different office locations during their lunch break and other scheduled times according to participants' preferred time. Nine participants from Rivers State, Nigeria were interviewed at various locations and according to their preferred times. The remaining six participants were interviewed in Abuja, Nigeria during the weekend at the Barcelona Hotel and other agreed locations. In each interview session, I collected the data through audio recordings in a face-to-face exchange and telephone interviews for follow up. I also took notes when some points demanded more clarification.

Certain factors apply to justifying the sample size (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016; Saunders, & Townsend, 2016; Yin, 2014). Some of the factors include (a) data saturation, (b) homogeneity or heterogeneity of data sources, and (c) the phenomenal diversity of the research issue. This study's research question and purpose on the identification of employability skills in online degree holders involved these factors. The choice of 2 participants from 10 business sectors justified data saturation and guaranteed the generation of no new information. The sample size equally satisfied the

identification strategies of diverse employability skills from different sectors. Another justification of the chosen sample size is that it led to the generalizability of research findings, which a single sector case study may not have guaranteed. I sought to achieve data saturation and obtain rich data through semistructured interviews, which meant no new information emerged from collected data, there was no indication of new coding, and data generated no new themes (Fusch, & Ness, 2015).

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher in qualitative research is the primary data collection instrument (Yin, 2013). I used one data collection tool for the study: semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. The approach allowed participants to use their prior experiences, knowledge, and encounters from online degree employees to provide answers. Open-ended questions in data collection ensure that participants are not limited to “yes” or “no” answers (Yin, 2014). Another advantage of the semistructured interview method is that I had the chance of asking follow-up questions, which add in-depth meaning to initial responses. One disadvantage of my approach that open-ended questions in face-to-face interviews may not as effective compared to telephone interviews that allow more freedom of expression (Harvey, 2015; Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). However, I audio-recorded the interviews and gave participants the opportunity to review transcribed interview for necessary clarifications before analysis of data.

I used an interview protocol (see Appendix B) as guide in this study to enhance the trustworthiness of the research (Hilton, 2017). The interview protocol enabled participants to understand the questions they expect to answer. The interview protocol



also acted as an agenda regarding the interviews and guaranteed the direction of questions and as well as uniformity regarding the interview process (Fakis, Hilliam, Stoneley, & Townend, 2014). I reviewed all interview data and documents to ensure the removal of personal information, which ensured the nondisclosure of participants' identification. I secured the participants' consent regarding the recording of interviews to enhance credibility. Securing participants' consent enhanced transcription for coding and data analysis.

**Expert validation.** Expert validation can be described as a method of obtaining experts' feedback (Anseel et al., 2015). I used Walden University's faculty experts' directory to reach out to 10 case study research experts. I sent my initial interview questions for their review regarding the quality and alignment of interview questions. I also requested their expert opinion regarding the ability of my interview questions to generate valid data that could address the research question. The feedback and comments from expert validation enabled me to revise the interview questions as found in Appendix B. The one overarching researching question was how HR professionals in Nigeria identify the employability skills of holders of online degrees.

By sharing their experiences, the participants in this study responded to questions from their different perspectives, which elaborated on the answers to the research question. The questions posed in the semistructured interview questions reflected the interview questions as well as the themes coming from the literature review. I sought for my dissertation committee members' review and validation of these semistructured interview questions and including validation from 3 experts.

According to Schwandt (2015), one thing to avoid in a semi structured interview is over-familiarity which could lead to reflexivity. Reflexibility according to Willig (2013) is a threat caused by the conversational nature of semi structured face to face interviews. To manage this reflexivity during the interviews, I used an effective time management strategy to enhance data dependability. I recruited twenty HR professionals from the ten sectors to participate in this study. I compare the data generated from each interview session with other individual interview data generated to actualize triangulation and data reliability. Gorissen, van Bruggen and Jochems (2013) explained methodological triangulation as the application of different data collection sources to reduce subjectivity and enhance validity. In this study, I used member checking to ensure data saturation. Cronin (2014) and Fusch and Ness (2015) defined member checking as the process that enables participants to interpret and review the individual answers they provide. The member checking process involves returning results or data for participants' validation and checking for accuracy (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

### **Procedures for Recruiting Participants and Data Collection**

I used the following procedures in preparing for data collection and subsequent data analysis during the study:

1. I obtained the approval of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).
2. I obtained the consent of individual CIPMN member who participated in this study.

3. I scheduled and conducted interviews with research participants in this study to gather useful data and also audio-recorded the interviews.
4. In the next step, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews.
5. I allowed participants to review the summarized transcripts to enable me to perform member checking. This fifth step enhanced the accuracy of the interpretations and meanings of participants' responses during interviews.
6. I imported all textual transcripts into Microsoft Word and proceed to data analysis with NVivo 12.

### **Procedures for Participants' Recruitment**

**Interest Expression.** I sent via email an expression request to identify participants from CIPMN in Rivers state, Lagos state, and Abuja, Nigeria. The purpose of this email was to recruit suitable participants in this study.

**Consent form.** I sent a consent form to a purposeful sample in this study. I made the form available to individual HR directors and managers that meet the inclusion criteria. I informed the participants of the voluntary nature of participation in the study, and there will not be any offering of financial incentives to the participants.

**Data collection plan.** I used semi structured interviews as my data collection techniques. The interviews procedures involved interview project conceptualization, access establishment, and contacting interviewees. Other steps included data collection, data transcribing, presentation of data, sharing of learnt lessons. Finally, I shared the outcome and lessons learnt from the study according to Seidman (2013). The unit of analysis were directors and heads of HR departments in various industries in Nigeria. The

industries were from banking, government, education, aviation, telecommunications, transport, health, finance, oil and gas, and consulting outfits. The participants included HR managers that have accepted online degree holders in their workforce. The research covered sectors that accept online degree holders into their workforces such as banks, oil and gas, and Nigerian government employers.

I used member checking, peer review, data triangulation, and participants' debriefing to establish trustworthiness. Triangulation enhanced data analysis from different sources. Triangulating data from sources such as individual participants' responses with other participants in the semi-structured interviews enhanced data analysis. I coordinated the date, location, and time of interviewing the participants. I used between 25 to 45 minutes to carry out the semi-structured face to face interviews. To capture the meaning of participants' responses to interview questions, I used member checking to accomplish such a goal. I carried out one-on-one interviews of 20 persons within four weeks to cover the 20 participants in the study. To accomplish professionalism when collecting data, I used some techniques. These techniques include designing, thematic procedures, interviewing, data transcribing, analysis, verifying and reporting of outcomes. To achieve confirmability, I maintained qualitative objectivity via entries in the reflexive journal. Seidman (2013) found the above techniques to be useful in achieving quality in data collection.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I performed data analysis of the data I collected from semi-structured interviews. According to Yin (2014) provided a series of steps a qualitative research method could

take. The steps include (a) data compilation, (b) data disassembly (c) data reassembly, (d) data interpretation, while the fifth step (e) is a data conclusion and meaning. I transcribed all recorded interviews from semi-structured components and conducted member checking. The next process was the uploading of textual transcripts into NVivo 12 software. The software worked on the data I transferred from Microsoft Word to enable me to organize into categories of themes and groups. As Miles and Huberman (2014) noted, before one commences the data collection process, it is important to determine the route of the entire process. According to the authors, the procedure to be predetermined will include means of data collection, an organization of data, and data storage. An important step for me was to develop a useful data framework that enhanced the use of collected data. In a case study analysis, Fakis et al. (2014) found that there a definite routine procedure a researcher can use to identify and relate meanings and themes regarding the research question.

One major research question in this study addressed how HR managers in Nigeria identify the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online degrees during job placement decisions. I designed interview questions to enable participants to provide data that addresses the research question. The data sources in this research came from semi-structured interviews. I sought to see that the interview questions addressed my desire to gather detailed information regarding employability skills found in this study's underpinning conceptual framework. I used Microsoft Excel to record data that were collected using semi-structured interviews.

With Microsoft Excel, I organized interview transcripts into columns regarding possible employability skills in holders of online degrees. The rows were for capturing participants' responses regarding identified employability skills. The interviewees were numbered serially from interviewee 1 to interviewee 20. As noted earlier, NVivo 12 was the software for thematic analysis. According to Richardson, Eearnhardt, and Marion (2015), NVivo 12 software is useful for coding, categorization, and as well as handling unstructured data. The interview questions provided an understanding of how HR managers in Nigeria identify the presence or absence of employability skills in online degree holders.

According to Aydin (2013), data analysis starts with pieces of data review and progresses to qualitative categories. I used NVivo 12 software and utilized Microsoft Excel spreadsheet having rows and columns. I assigned tabs for each interview question. After transcribing the interview questions, allocating themes and codes, I performed hand coding. For the reliability of results, I used manual and as well as NVivo 12 data coding. Based on the categories of information identified in the literature review, I assessed the reliability of data analysis tools through cross referencing. To organize the information, I obtained in the study; I created matrices with the aid of Microsoft Excel. According to Miles and Huberman (2014), Brakewood and Poldrack (2013) and Kim (2014), coding enhances the linking of data to transcribed interviews.

Another aspect of data analysis plan is the establishment of either discrepancies, convergence or divergence in data analysis. As Stuckey (2015) noted, qualitative data is better managed when researchers categorize their data into codes to enhance in-depth

understanding of the case study. I managed the interviewees' responses into codes per participant. A researcher can equally determine the groupings and as well as codes connected to participants' responses through the use of predetermined codes or groupings (Stuckey, 2015). I identified the major and minor themes using the NVivo 12 software. I analyzed the data I collected from the semi-structured interviews. I matched the outcomes from such analysis with the background literature review underpinning the conceptual framework.

Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, and Neville (2014) found that when researchers triangulate from different sources, we can achieve accuracy in reporting. I took the seat of a researcher in this study to develop a precoding structure and related the same to the conceptual framework. I equally related the precoding structure to the semi-structured interviews and derived themes for data analysis. I used an iterative procedure to enhance efficacy regarding the collected data and themes matching. I used data generated from the semi-structured interviews to produce codes and themes match. To determine discrepancies and pattern match, I examined successive semi-structured interview responses and answers. I interviewed 20 participants and monitored data saturation. I categorized the codes and themes to align with the underpinning conceptual framework. Finally, I enhanced correctness and precision through review of the dimensions.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In determining the rigor of qualitative research, there are some frameworks of credibility, reliability, dependability, transferability, and conformability (Morse, 2015).

Credibility is the research process where the researcher uses prolonged engagement and as well as a persistent review of the document, peer debriefing, member checking and triangulation in data collection (Morse, 2015). We can use an audit trail and reflexivity to ensure dependability and conformability of a study (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). The reader or user of a study decides the transferability of such study (Morse, 2015). Funder et al. (2013) took a different approach regarding how to improve the dependability in research and educational practice. The authors recommended that for research practice, researchers are to (a) describe and address the choice of  $N$  (sample size) and consequent issues of statistical power, (b) report effect sizes and 95% confidence intervals (CIs), (c) avoid “questionable research practices” that can inflate the probability of Type I error.

Other recommendations by the authors are that researchers should (d) make available research materials necessary to replicate reported results, (e) adhere to SPSS’s data sharing policy, (f) encourage publication of high-quality replication studies, and (g) maintain flexibility and openness to alternative standards and methods. On the aspect of educational practice, the authors recommended that researchers should (a) encourage a culture of “getting it right,” (b) teach and encourage transparency of data reporting, (c) improve methodological instruction, and (d) model sound science and support junior researchers who seek to “get it right”. I used some of the recommendations that are an applicable qualitative research approach to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.



## **Credibility**

Credibility is the internal validity that uses prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing and member checks (Morse, 2015). I strove to maintain credibility while carrying out this study by doing a one-on-one interview with the 20 participants. I maximized my time during the interview processes to garner sufficient and in-depth understanding of this case study. I sought to get all relevant themes and ensure that no new themes emerged before concluding each interview. As Houghton et al. (2013) noted, we achieve credibility when we research in such a manner that attracts acceptability that the research was carried out with trustworthy processes.

I ensured the recording and transcribing of each interview for the 20 participants word for word. I made available to participants the transcribed manuscripts for useful comments and corrections. The essence of the word for word transcribing of interviews was to ensure that research findings and conclusions did not come from participant's interpretation. I pursued closing of any gaps or clarify imprecise statements by reviewing transcripts and return to each participant with my interpretation of what he or she said. I utilized the triangulation strategy to secure credibility. I used multiple participants for the semi-structured interview to enhance insight and in-depth understanding of the study.

The multiple sources helped in ensuring data saturation. Another strategy I used to enhance credibility is a triangulation of sources (use of multiple data). To reduce the effect of bias during semi-structured interviews, I took my notes with rapt attention. Peer debriefing added strength to the research process as found by Houghton et al. (2013). I engage a Walden University case study expert to review my draft interview questions to

confirm the alignment of interview questions with the study design. I requested from the participants to go through transcribed documents to validate the accuracy of records of participants' responses and meanings. I equally used member checking to verify data credibility.

To further pursue credibility, I corrected any discrepancies that arose from the data I collected through semi-structured interviews. I used member checking to reinforce my checks as the researcher. I wrote out the questions, sent copies to participants for member checking. I returned my interpretations to participants to ascertain that I have captured meanings of what was said. I continued this process to ascertain that there are no new emerging themes. According to Yin (2014), maintaining credibility or internal validity involves using multiple evidence sources rather than using a single source. The author further recommended the establishment of a case study database and maintaining a chain of evidence. Yin (2014) however cautioned against the use of information sources from social media.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is *the degree to which we can transfer the results of qualitative research to other contexts or settings with other respondents* (Korstjens, & Moser, 2018). I provided a detailed explanation of the findings of the study to achieve transferability in this study; The detailed explanations could help future users or readers to decide to apply the results in other study contexts and locations. The explanations to enhance transferability covered research methods, research design, and presentation of data. Marshall and Rossman (2016) explained that future readers could make their own

decisions regarding the transferability of a study. CIPMN is the umbrella body of HR professionals in Nigeria involved in recruitment decisions for online and traditional degree holders. Participants from CIPMN cover all sectors of private and public organizations and as well as all industries. The outcome of this study may be transferable to any sector or industry that holds employment opportunity for online and traditional degree holders.

### **Dependability**

Dependability according to Morse (2015) and Korstjens and Moser (2018) refers to the stability of research findings over time. The authors explained that dependability means that researchers describe transparently the steps they took from the beginning of research work, research development and reporting of research findings. Dependability also makes researchers use audit trail that enables a reader to understand the steps that led to research conclusions (Houghton et al., 2013). I provided an audit trail that will provide the steps and stages from the beginning to the conclusion of this study. I transparently described all the procedures I took so that readers can understand the steps that led to my research conclusions.

### **Confirmability**

Morse (2015) and Korstjens and Moser (2018) described confirmability as the ability of other researchers to confirm the findings of the given research. Confirmability means that other researchers can confirm that the data and interpretations of the findings are not just the imaginations of the researcher. I used entries in a reflexive journal to ensure confirmability in this study. I created an audit trail using a reflective journal to

ensure confirmability. Other reflexive journal entries to enhance confirmability included data thematization and justification for research methodology decisions. I documented all reflections concerning culture, biases, personal experiences and explanations that could influence and inform the research process (Morse, 2015). The credibility of any research does not depend only on the research procedures but also depends on the researcher's self-awareness all through the research process (Houghton et al., 2013). To enhance data validity and reliability, I utilized a member checking procedure. After conducting the interviews and transcribed the audio recordings, I proceeded to interpret and share my interpretations. The sharing of my interpretations was with research participants to obtain their feedback and validate the data.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The interview process according to Seidman (2013) involves (a) conceptualization of the interview plan, (b) creation of access and communicating with population sample, and (c) interviewing the population sample. Other interview processes are (d) transcribing the data and (e) presentation of findings for all stakeholders who may find the research relevant. In this study, protecting participants' rights will be my priority. I sent a consent form to participants informing them of their rights to reject or accept to participate in the study. It was the participants' right to withdraw at any time from the study. This right to withdraw at any time was made clear in the informed consent form and expression of interest email. I will keep collected data in this study for 5 years period in a safe place. After the 5 years period, I will shred interview notes, transcripts, and all

flash drives that I used in the data collection process. I secured the Walden University IRB approval for the study.

### **Informed Consent**

Informed consent in research is the process of genuinely informing potential participants of their roles, rights, and risks before enrolment into a study (Regmi, Aryal, Kurmi, Pant, Teijlingen, & Wasti, 2017). Securing informed consent from every participant according to the authors is a mandatory ethical research practice. I provided all potential participants in my study with clear information regarding their roles, risks, and rights to obtain their informed consent. I was clear to participants the purpose of the study, the use of the collected data, self-funding of my research and requirements from participants. Also, I informed participants of the time requirements during the interview, member checking, and further clarifications that I needed more insights. Another information I gave the participants was that participation is voluntary and no payments of incentives. I secured the consent of each CIPMN member before contacting them to participate in the study.

### **Confidentiality**

In this study, I had a face to face contact with research participants and I strove to achieve confidentiality of data collection. Confidentiality involves keeping data secure from unauthorized parties (Hiriscau, Stingelin-Giles, Stadler, Schmeck, & Reiter-Theil, 2014; Turcotte-Tremblay, & Sween-Cadieux, 2018). To achieve confidentiality during interview sessions, I linked all comments or questions to specific names of participants. I allowed participants to provide their interview responses, comments, and revisions to

transcripts confidentially through emails. I protected the data and secured all records on an encrypted computer hard drive that I pass-worded to prevent unauthorized access.

### **Protecting Participants from Harm**

As a cautionary notice, I disclosed to all participants every activity that could lead to potential harmful outcomes. It is possible in a research interview that participants may disclose information they might regret giving out later in different interview setting (Fiske, & Hauser, 2014). I explained to participants all details regarding the scope of the study to avoid disclosing unrelated information or responses. The participants had the liberty to walk away from participation at any time. I ensured that the interview protocol does not contain irrelevant details. To get an in-depth understanding of the case study, I asked follow-up questions that resulted from interview questions.

### **Protecting the Researcher from Risk**

I used respectful acknowledgement, empathy and changing the topic when necessary to respond to queries from participants. I used debriefing and feedback opportunities to manage the risks associated with this research interviews. While there is much concern regarding risks that participants face in any research, researchers equally face different types of risks (Stahlke, 2018). Researchers' risks refer to that harm that could come to the researcher while in the field or after the research project (Brougham, & Uttley, 2017). Some of the risks include the emotional impacts of research on sensitive topics, disagreeable participants' statements and distressing stories (Stahlke, 2018). I strove to consider and address these risks throughout the research process as they arise. I did not foresee the occurrence of any emotional harm but was conscious that some risks

may appear along the way. I identified and addressed the risks as much as I could (Stahlke, 2018).

### **Summary**

In chapter 3, I described the case study research design. I explained the qualitative method that would serve as the underpinning guide for the research project. The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate how HR managers identified the availability of employability skills in holders of online degrees during recruitment and promotion decisions. The research design I employed in this study served as interview questions' guide to enable me to extract relevant information to answer the major research question.

The study population was made up of 20 HR professionals who represented the case. I selected 2 participants from 10 sectors covering government and non-governmental organizations. I used semi structured data collection method in the study. The semi-structured interviews enabled me to explore the research question. In chapter 4, I will analyze the data I will collect and present the data for the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identify the presence or absence of employability skills in online degree holders in their employment decisions. I conducted a qualitative analysis of collected data from 20 semistructured interviews to address the research question as well as the purpose of the study. The organization of collected data during the interview was through the NVivo 12 software. One major research question in the study was: How do HR managers identify the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online degrees during job placement and promotion decisions? To address the research question, I prepared a semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix B). The interview protocol helped enhance consistency in responses with follow-up questions where I needed necessary clarification. I audio-recorded all interviews and took notes.

In Chapter 4, I present the findings through data analysis from 20 interviews with HR professionals in Nigeria who have a minimum of 5 years of recruiting experience. The 20 participants are from 10 different industries with two participants from each sector. Chapter 4 includes the following components: (a) research setting, (b) demographics, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, (e) evidence of trustworthiness, (f) interview results from 20 HR professionals from 10 different industries in Nigeria and (g) the chapter summary.



### **Research Setting**

There was consistency in the setting during the process of data collection. I recruited two participants each from banking, government, education, aviation, telecommunications, transport, health, finance, oil and gas, and consulting outfits. Participants were HR professionals who employed or promoted both face-to-face and online degree holders to avoid participant bias that could influence the results of the study. I worked with the participants' chosen time and preferred interview dates. Out of 20 participants, nine agreed to be interviewed during their lunch break at their office canteens, whereas 11 participants opted for a weekend meeting at parks. However, there were changes of dates and times during the process.

Before the commencement of any interview session, I gave explanations regarding the focus and objective of the study to each participant. There was an opportunity for each participant to confirm the adequacy of their inclusion based on inclusion criteria and the capability to answer interview questions without bias. Relying on the signed consent form before the commencement of the interview, I made preliminary briefings to participants. The briefings covered the confidentiality of all collected data, the transcripts, audio recorded files, and that they will be kept secured for a minimum of 5 years. To provide consistency during the data collection process, I followed the interview protocol.

### **Demographics**

It took over 2 weeks to recruit the 20 participants for this study. I e-mailed the consent letters to each participant to indicate his/her consent via e-mail. After the consent

letters/messages were returned, I followed up with requesting for the scheduling of a convenient date and time. All 20 HR professionals expressed their interest to participate in the semistructured interview. All the 20 participants signed the consent form before participating in the study. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Sector	Years of experience	CIPM rank	HR position
Ndidi	Banking	15	MCIPM	Manager
Ugochi	Banking	11	MCIPM	Manager
Obioma	Education	21	ACIPM	Director
Ukwunna	Education	9	ACIPM	Manager
Iyaknse	Aviation	10	MCIPM	Manager
Enyereibe	Aviation	15	MCIPM	Manager
Sochi	Telecom	13	MCIPM	Manager
Ikedi	Telecom	16	MCIPM	Director
Akuyoma	Transport	12	ACIPM	Director
Ebere	Transport	9	ACIPM	Manager
Ngozi	Health	19	MCIPM	Director
Kelechi	Health	8	MCIPM	Manager
Eno	Finance	14	ACIPM	Director
Uche	Finance	16	MCIPM	Director
Amarachi	Oil and gas	22	ACIPM	Director
Atuonye	Oil and gas	25	ACIPM	Director
Chikwere	Government	10	ACIPM	Manager
Chijioke	Government	18	ACIPM	Director
Chinonye	Consulting	17	ACIPM	Director
Amara	Consulting	22	FCIPM	Director

**Data Collection**

I recruited participants from members of the CIPMN immediately after receiving Walden University IRB approval (#02-19-18-0592215). Using the available data on the CIPMN website, I contacted HR managers and directors using their email addresses. I

followed up on those who expressed willingness to participate and met the inclusion criteria with the consent form to secure their informed consent. I made further contacts to explain the nature and purpose of the study to secure trust and confidence from potential participants. All participants expressed their clear understanding of the study and willingness to participate at their chosen dates and time. The 20 participants returned the request I sent with the expression “I CONSENT.”

Some of the participants made a change in their schedules and had to reschedule the semistructured interview dates and times. After the agreed dates and times, I proceeded to conduct the remaining interviews for the participants. There was an agreement between each participant and me regarding a convenient location and time for interviews. Five participants’ interview took place in Lagos, Nigeria at different office locations during their lunch break and other scheduled times according to participants’ preferred time. Nine participants from Rivers State, Nigeria were interviewed at various locations and according to their preferred times. The remaining six participants were interviewed in Abuja, Nigeria during the weekend at the Barcelona Hotel and other agreed locations. In each interview session, I collected the data through audio recordings in a face-to-face exchange and telephone interviews for follow-up and I took notes for clarification.

In some of the interviews, participants seemed to be concerned about the level of academic rigor that may be involved or receiving difficult questions. I told them that they were free to give answers to the best of their experiences and ability. In all the semistructured interviews, the interview protocol formed the guide for all questions as

well as follow-up questions. I noticed that some participants referred to their experiences in the peculiarity of their industry skills demand and not necessarily on the skills possessed by job applicants.

### **Data Analysis**

I used semistructured interviews to triangulate and compare collected data. In my data analysis process, I used Yin's (2014) five steps to conduct the data analysis procedures: (a) data compilation, (b) data disassembly (c) data reassembly, (d) data interpretation, and (e) is a data conclusion and meaning. A research approach in a qualitative study can include a research plan that guides the study through a step-by-step process (Maxwell, 2014). In addition to Yin's five steps, I considered (a) familiarization with data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming of themes, and (f) producing the report or establishment of theme collaboration (Nowell, Norris, Deborah, White, & Moules, 2017).

In the data collection, the first step involved familiarization and compilation of the transcripts from the 20 HR participants in this study. In the second step, I disassembled and assigned initial coding to each sentence of the responses from the 20 participants to the semistructured interview questions. Third, I reassembled and explored collected data for possible themes that could replace each of the codes. In the fourth step, I reexamined the correctness of each theme and created clusters of common themes through labeling and identification of themes. Step 5 was the identification of themes to collaborate themes with the highest percentages of occurrence and to rank them

accordingly. I used Microsoft Excel and NVivo 12 to organize data in tabular and chart formats.

In data presentation, I used ranking in percentage of occurrence to demonstrate which themes occurred most in participants' responses. I also identified subthemes from participants' responses that aligned with the main interview questions with the aid of the interview protocol. Using the clustering and ranking of themes, I report on themes that have a 10% occurrence and above. Coded themes with less than 10% occurrence are equally presented in tables and charts but have no further analysis or further explanation. The study research question acted as the lens that enabled me to form the codes and categories in the study. In the data transcription process, I relied on several and repeated listening of audio records of participants' responses to achieve accuracy. Participants were also requested to validate the accuracy of their interview responses for member checking and review of transcription copies to identify discrepancies.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

I used member checking to ensure credibility (see Cronin, 2014; Fusch, & Ness, 2015). I used semistructured interviews as data sources to perform triangulation and data validation. To achieve credibility, I photocopied all transcripts for each participant's comments and review of the interpretation of answers. Member checking assisted in enhancing the authenticity of participants' answers to interview questions. I also presented to the 20 participants the document reviews and interpretation of interview responses to ensure data credibility. After analyzing data collected through

semistructured interviews, I found that findings disconfirmed and confirmed previous literature as presented in Chapter 2.

### **Transferability**

The results of this study can be transferable to individuals, institutions, private organizations, and government organizations that need to understand the strategies for identifying employability skills in online degree holders. However, transferability is usually left for the reader to decide (Marshall, & Rossman, 216). For future research to find this study's information useful, I used an adequate and rich data description to present complete interview findings as it concerns the research question.

### **Dependability**

Throughout this research process, I outlined all research activities using an audit trail. This step and process enabled me to justify the research design and research method. To secure assurances that the interview questions would generate useful responses from participants, I engaged three experts for expert validation. The three expert validation involved three research experts from Walden University confirming that the interview questions are valid to generate useful answers to the research question. Another factor that made the study dependable is the use of audio recordings and field notes. The transcripts were also validated by the participants through member checking after transcribing interview responses to enhance dependability and guarantee accuracy and consistence regarding data.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the correctness and objectivity of research data (Houghton et al., 2015). To ensure conformability, I did an affirmation of the dependability, credibility, and transferability of the study. I avoided bias during the data analysis by corroborating the findings with the interpretations and conclusions. Additionally, I used member checking to receive feedback from the 20 participants that validated the process of data collection.

### **Study Results**

During the interview sessions, Nigeria HR experts took their turns to express their assessments of the performances of online degree in their various organizations. Two issues led me to carry out this research. First, the general problem, which is that some HR managers do not identify employability skills in online degree holders during hiring decisions (see Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014; Fogle, & Elliot, 2013). Second, the specific problem, which is that online degrees are deemed unacceptable for employment in Nigeria in multiple sectors, the government agencies being a prime example (see Agbebaku, & Adavbiele, 2016; Yakasai, 2017).

Through methodological triangulation, themes emerged from codes of the document reviews and semistructured interview questions; the themes that kept reoccurring became the themes that aligned with the study research question. According to the frequency of occurrence, the themes that had up to 30% and above were analyzed further in the study. Such themes were found to have convergence with the reviewed literature and provided answers to the research question. In this section I also present

themes that occurred below 30% as discrepant responses. The evidence regarding theme formation came from the transcription of participants' interview responses, which were transcribed word for word except for exclamation words such as "eeems" and "eeehs" to keep the responses as pure as possible. Following the order of the semistructured interview questions protocol, I made a presentation of themes according to the highest order of occurrence. To triangulate the data, I included themes that emerged from document reviews.

### **Research Question**

How do HR managers identify the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online degrees during job placement and promotion decisions?

### **Themes**

#### **Possession of Relevant Skills**

I created case nodes for each participant and went further to do auto coding to assemble all the various interview questions into one page. I categorized the responses of individual HR experiences into excellent, very good, good and poor. Ukwunna, Ndidi, Chinonye, Uche, and Amara found online degree holders to have excellent job skills (see Figure 1). These participants are from the education, banking, consulting, and finance sectors, respectively.



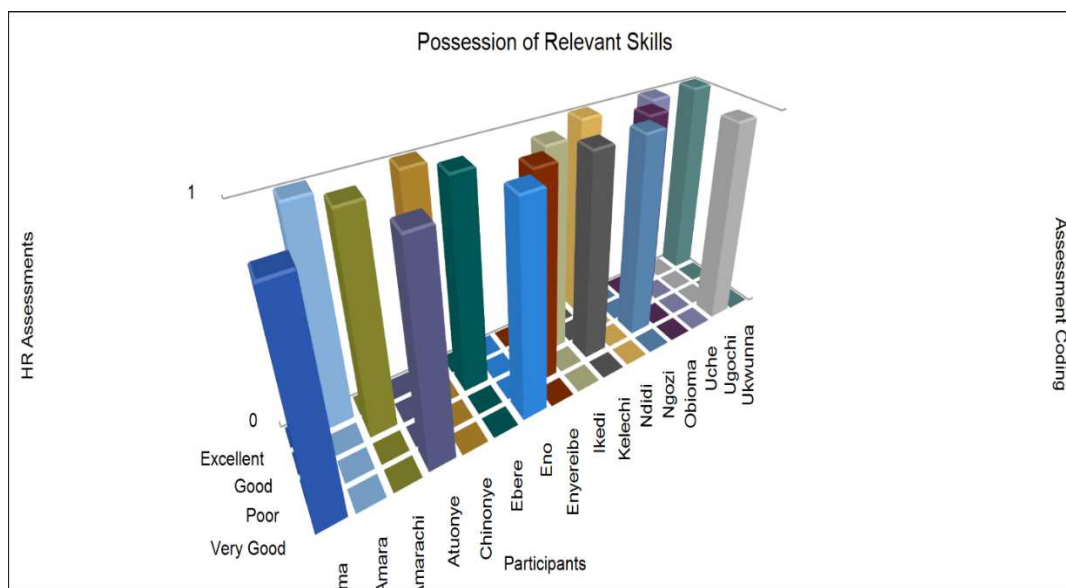


Figure 1. Possession of relevant skills.

For, Enyereibe, Kelechi, Ngozi, who are from aviation and health sectors, online degree holders come with poor job skills. Their experiences centered on technical job skills. From the education, telecom, oil, and gas, and transport sectors, Obioma, Ikedi, Amarachi, Ebere found the skills to be good (Figure 1). The final rating of very good skills possession came from Akuyoma, Ugochi, Eno, and Atuonye, who are from transport, banking, finance, and oil and gas respectively. Chijioke and Chikwere from the government sector did not give clear answers regarding their experiences with online degree holders in their establishments.

### Theme 1: Discovery of Relevant Skills

From the analysis and interpretation of collected data from the semistructured research interviews, the first theme emerged (see Table 2).

Table 2

*HR Experience with Online Degree Holders*

Codes	Themes	Number of Occurrences	Percentage of occurrences
Demonstrated employability skills	Discovery of relevant skills	16	80%
Showed poor possession of hard skills	Hard skills shortage	3	15%
Did not find relevant skills possession in some	Lacking in some employability skills	1	5%

In summary, I found that 80% of HR professionals interviewed gave a response that they identified employability skills in holders of online degrees during recruitment and promotion decisions. Sixteen participants who have recruited or promoted both face-to-face and online degree holders described their experiences with online degree holders affirming the possession of relevant skills (see Table 2). Ugochi commented that

I used to hold a negative perception regarding online degrees but have got a different result during recruiting exercises; I was surprised to find that online degree holders possessed some real skills such as good communication and time management skills.

Enyereibe responded that “Acquiring academic degrees, from my recruiting experience, is just one way job applicants show some possession of employability skills. Both face-to-face and online degree holders in our organization showed possession of employability skills before we employed or promoted them.”

Kelechi, Eno, and Chijioke, agreed that their employees with online degrees were already working and had demonstrated employability skills in service before acquiring

online degrees. Eno opined that: “Some of my staff that went through an online academic program were found to pass through the very rigorous academic path and we cherish their employability skills they bring into the job. As Chijioke stated: For me, I will say they possess good employability skills.” From the experiences of Akuyoma, Amarachi, and Atuonye, they found employability skills in online degree holders both as fresh graduates and those already in the workforce. Amara stated that “In recruiting for industries such as banking, telecommunication, and marketing, online degree holders as fresh graduates and those with working experience, showed good quality employability skill.” Amarachi went further to state that: Some of the fresh online graduates had some industrial training and marketing experiences.

Sochi, Ikedi, Ngozi, and Uche relied on the nature of the business operations of their organizations to respond to their experiences in recruiting and promoting employees with face to face or online degrees. Sochi stated: “In our organization, that is into information technology, our recruitment and promotion experiences showed that online degree holders possessed relevant IT skill.” Ikedi opined that their marketing business demands good communication skills, excellent interaction with clients and customers which they found both online and face to face degree holders. Eno and Uche who work in the financial sector, time management skills are one of the major skills considered when making hiring decisions. According to Ngozi and Uche, time management skills were found majorly in online degree holders and in particular those who combined their educational pursuits with working experience.

The possession of employability skills by online degree holders emerged as the major theme from the responses regarding the experiences of HR professionals who participated in the semi-structured interview questions. Possession of employability skills either by face to face or online degree holders is what recruiters demand in the labor market (Suarda et al., 2017). The decision of recruiters determines the possession of such skills according to Wilton (2014), *'employability is in the eye of the beholder, and this leads to employer decision-making in the recruitment of work placement.'* The theme of possession of employability skills by online degree holders extends the body of knowledge regarding recruiters' strategies in identifying relevant skills during recruitment and promotion decisions.

**Hard skills shortage.** The occurrence of the first subtheme came from data analysis and interpretation of collected data from semi-structured interview questions. Three participants (15%) of the 20 HR experts that participated in the study expressed their experience of hard skills shortage among holders of online degrees. Kelechi stated: "For hard skills possession, I will say no, when you look at an applicant's practical experiences in areas like surgery, delivery of babies, technical knowledge in practical treatments of patients, I do not see online degrees to cover these areas. We do not consider online degrees in searching for such hard skills". Amara opined that: "For possession of some hard skills by online degree holders, it will be difficult if the employee had no prior practical experience." The lack of these hard skills in online degree holders has echoed study participants from the medical and aviation sector (Iyaknse, Enyereibe, Kelechi, and Ngozi). The participants affirmed that they would not

hire for instance online degree holder to pilot an aircraft without practical experience.

Again, participants from the health sector echoed a similar position that medical practice recruitment decision may not consider a job applicant with an online degree in medicine without practical experience.

According to Chikwere: “Hard skills is one area where we look beyond degree type. I find both face to face and online degrees not measuring up during recruitment decisions especially for entry level applicants”. From the experience of Ebere: “When it comes to hard skills, we look beyond the degree and test the practical experience and knowledge. If an applicant claims to be able to operate a machine, you wouldn’t assume such to be correct except you test the practicality of such claims in the resume. In some cases, you find that the technical knowledge or hard skill is lacking”.

While the teaching of hard skills takes place in both online and face to face settings (Tran, 2015), recruiters do not identify such skills through resume only. Possession of hard skills significantly affects the working quality of the employee and recruiters’ hiring decisions (Sitompul et al., 2017). Again, possession of hard skills should be complemented with soft skills to enhance acceptability during recruiting and promotion decisions (Rao, 2014). The theme of a shortage of hard skills in online degree holders extends the body of knowledge regarding recruiters’ identification of employability skills in online degree holders.

## **Theme 2: Does not form the Determinant Factor**

The second emergent theme came from data analysis and interpretation of collected data from the responses to the question 2: How would you describe the role of

degree type in identifying employability skills during recruitment and promotion decisions? Theme 2 occurred twenty times (100%) from the total responses of 20 participants. Table 3 displays the major theme and the subtheme from participants' responses. Participants 1-20 are in agreement that degree type does not form the determinant factor during recruiting and promotion decisions. All 20 participants agreed that it is a rare thing for recruiters to have degree type as a prerequisite or condition when advertising for any job or carrying out promotion exercises. Ndidi opined that: "Degree type is not our basis for identifying employability skills. You can see that in most job adverts, we do not say you must have an online degree or face to face degree. We look for areas of competencies and applicability of program of study to the position for hiring decision". Kelechi stated that: "From my experience, online higher institutions usually do not indicate on the certificate that a degree is online or face to face except for known institutions. I do not firstly go into investigating the degree type during recruitment or promotion decisions."

Amarachi stated that: "In promotion decisions, we rely on employee performance and productivity and not degree type." Chinonye responded as follows: "Employability skills in graduates is a problem these days whether in online degree holders or face to face degree holders. It is not the degree type that plays the major role but the Institutional reputation that counts as well as their ability to showcase their skills". The theme is in agreement with previous studies on the role of degree type in recruitment and promotion decisions. Chebl & El Rayess (2017) in their study found that degree type does not determine the possession or superiority of employability skills. According to their

findings, academic library employers indicated that online degree holders could demonstrate better communication skills more than face to face degree holders.

Table 3

*Role of Degree Type*

Codes	Themes	Number of Occurrences	Percentage of occurrences
Not a major consideration in recruitment and promotion decisions	Does not form the determinant factor	20	100%
Affects perception of applicant's employability	Generates bias in recruitment	4	20%
Could lead to poor acceptability	Low acceptance	1	5%

**Generates bias in recruitment.** Atuonye and Chijioke in their responses

expressed that online degree type if identified, may affect the perception of recruiters and could generate bias in recruitment decisions. According to Atuonye: "Majority of my experience in recruiting has been with holders of face to face degree holders. I have recruited a few people with online degrees. On a frank note, online degree holders faced some bias in my decisions. I did not feel as sure the holders of such certificate possessed quality skills for the job. I found my perception to be wrong when I interacted with such employees during recruitment or promotion decisions." Chijioke also confirmed the bias degree type could cause as follows: "When we used probation job placement after initial screening, online degree applications within a short time proved to have requisite skills as against our initial fears." The responses from Atuonye and Chijioke aligns with prior studies that perceptions of employers are not enough measures of employability skills

(Wilton, 2014). One way to secure a reliable result has come from sharing their experiences with online degree holders in their employ.

### **Theme 3: Soft Skills**

The third major theme emerged from the data analysis and interpretation of collected data from semi-structured interview question: What kind of employability skills have you identified in online degree holders as a recruiter before job placement or promotion decisions? There were 18 (90%) occurrences of the major theme from the 20 participants interviewed. Figure 2 shows the major theme and as well as the subthemes that occurred from the participants' responses. Ndidi stated: "Over these years of recruiting and promotion experiences, I have identified in online degree holders such skills as time management skills; for example, their ability to manage work and pursue academic goals, critical thinking skills, teamwork skills, and good communication skills." This theme confirms past research reviewed (Grossman, & Johnson, 2017) whose findings indicate that recruiters "*perceive a greater potential for soft skill attainment in the online environment.*"

Ugochi opined that: "In our organization, we found some employability skills in online degree holders just as in face to face degree holders before our final selection decisions. Some of these skills include; personal skills and attitude, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, and critical thinking skills." Iyaknse and Enyereibe went a step further to indicate that some of the identified skills were found both at the entry level recruitment decisions and during promotion exercises. Ugochi from the banking industry, for instance, noted that: "Some of them were more proficient in technological and

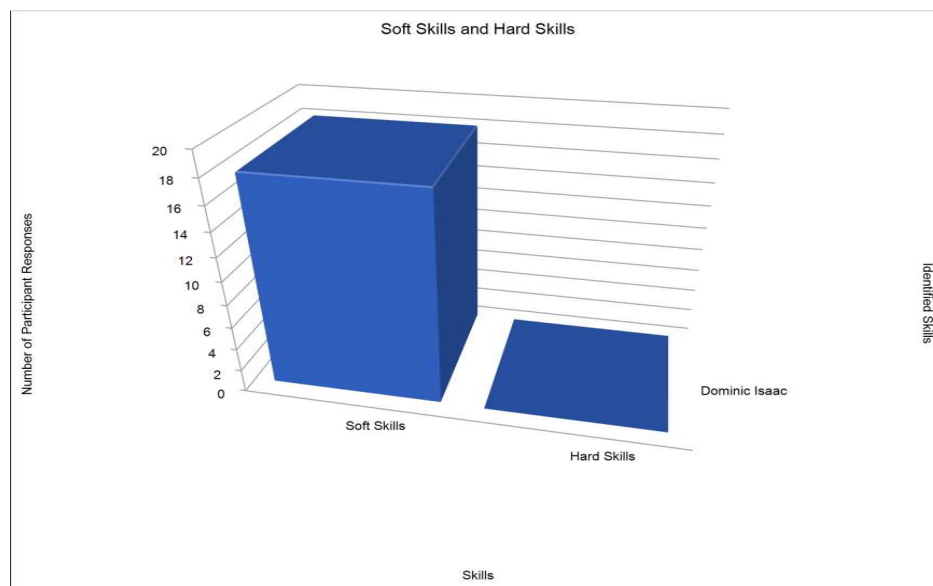


Information processing skills, coordinating skills, interpersonal skills, and teamwork skills.”

Obioma stated that: “One key issue we look out for during recruiting is the synergy of experiential learning that links learning with activity. A graduate who has experience of practical learning is better than those who did rote learning.” According to Ukwunna: “Some of these online degree holders come with this experiential learning that makes employability skills identification easy for the recruiter.” The reviewed research of Helyer and Lee (2014) confirms this theme when they found that “learning and doing cannot be separated and therefore to use knowledge to its fullest potential it must be implemented, performed and enhanced as part of a synergy.”

Akuyoma stated: “We have discovered several skills among which are lifelong learning skills, technological literacy skills, occupational skills in health, and the environment.” Ukwunna noted: “I have found in online degree holders during recruitment processes some of the following employability skills; taking initiative skills, team building skills, organizing skills, leadership skills, and persistence skills.” Obioma stated: “Some of the skills I have found in them include; problem solving, personnel management, and interpersonal skills. For Ukwunna, the identified skills are: “ability to conceptualize, organize, verbal thoughts, conflict solver, and able to work in a team.” The experiences of these participants agreed with past literature that different sectors or industries demand and identify different employability skills (Ortiz et al., 2016; Suarta et al., 2017). The emergent theme in this section added to the body of knowledge that

recruiters' demand for employability skills varies from sector to sector and even from nation to nation (Suartha et al., 2017).



*Figure 2.* HR identified soft and hard skills.

**Hard skills.** This subtheme came from data analysis and interpretation of collected data from semi-structured interview questions. The subtheme appeared just two times (10%) out of the 20 participants that took part in the case study. Ukwunna stated: “In recruiting graduate engineers into our workforce, we have discovered from online degree holders such skill as data analysis skills, engineering skills, systems, and process development skills, solving technical problem skills and computer literacy skills.” Amara stated: “We find some technical skills among online degree holders which you see through practical tests and simulations with some jobs. Some of them who had prior technical training do display technical abilities or skills which show when you give them assignments as part of the recruitment process.” The theme here agreed with past literature regarding the identification of hard skills as tangible technical and academic

skills and are specific, countable, and definable (Sitompul et al., 2017). This theme has added to the body of knowledge that hard skills are academic skills and pedagogic competence and professional competence (Mahmudah, 2016).

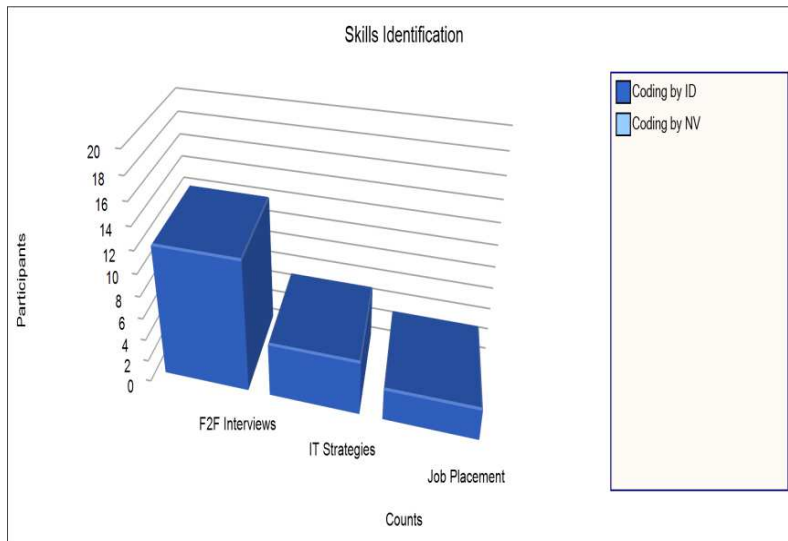
#### **Theme 4: Face-to-face interviews**

The result of the fourth major theme resulted from the analysis and interpretation of collected data from the semi-structured interview question: What strategies did you use to discover employability skills in holders of online degrees before job placement and promotion decisions? The central theme of face-to-face interviews occurred 12 times (60%) out of 20 HR experts who participated in the study. Figure 3 contains the emergent major theme and subthemes that resulted from data analysis of the responses from 20 participants. Ugochi stated: “In our recruiting processes, we adopt the traditional interview strategies such as face to face panel, phone interview, and aptitude tests. During such sessions, you look at the applicant’s resume and ask questions relating to qualifications and work experience.” Obioma expressed that: “From my experience, some of the applicants demonstrated employability skills by addressing the questions and concerns raised during interview sessions.” The theme extends the body of knowledge that traditional interview method is one of the ways of identifying employability skills (Mohapatra, & Sahu, 2017).

Iyaknse answered: “Sometimes, during interviews, you use the job applicant’s carriage, communication skills and display of prior experience in a particular job to ascertain the possession of the skill you are looking for before making recruitment decisions.” Akuyoma stated that: “In our recruitments, we mostly use assessment tests,

unstructured and structured interview questions to identify the very potential employee to be engaged into our service. For online degree holders just like their face to face counterparts, we administer short tests that can give us insights and identify soft skills in potential employees.” Akuyoma went further to explain that such tests help them eliminate hiring biases by relying only on traditional interviews. This theme extends the body of knowledge that *‘there is a growing shift from traditional intuition based hiring to data drove hiring process in modern day organizations’* (Mohapatra, & Sahu, 2017).

**Technology-based recruitment strategies.** This subtheme came from data analysis and interpretation of collected data from semi-structured interview questions. The subtheme appeared five times (25%) out of the 20 participants that took part in the case study. Ikedi stated that: “We have recently introduced technology based tests, surveys, and assessment with such tools like “Pymetrics” in our recruiting decisions. We find this tool a very useful strategy in identifying employability skills in job applicants”. Ngozi explained that: “We do not rely solely on the resume alone for recruitment processes in our company. Our organization has introduced some recruiting software that utilizes analytics in recruitment processes.” Ngozi went further to explain that: “We have realized that using the software in the recruitment process does not focus on gender, degree type or other considerations in traditional recruitment procedures.” This theme is consistent with previous studies that found that technology based recruitment strategies are gaining grounds and removing the limitations of traditional interviews (Mohapatra, & Sahu, 2017). According to the authors, hiring decisions are massively shifting from traditional intuition based to data driven hiring processes in modern day organizations.



*Figure 3.* Skills identification strategies.

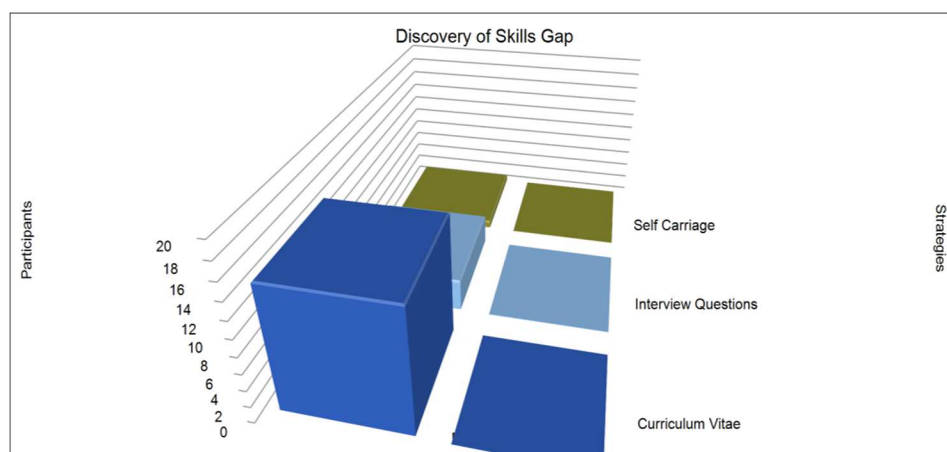
**Short-term job placement.** This subtheme came from data analysis and interpretation of collected data from semi-structured interview questions. The subtheme appeared three times (15%) out of the 20 participants that took part in the case study. Ukwunna stated that: “While we use normal interview approach and its inherent limitations, we go further to adopt in some cases probationary job placement after initial screening. Applications within a short time can prove to have requisite skills or otherwise. This strategy helps us cover the gaps with traditional interview method.” Eyereibe opined that: “At times we use indirect assessment of candidates to understand their outside interactions. We can use our company staff, or situations and simulations to assess a candidate’s interpersonal skills, communication skills, etc.” According to Sochi: “Most of our recruitment decisions utilize the strategy of short practical tests or examination of job applicants. In our engineering department, we cannot rely on mere

answers to interview questions or resume screening. The applicant’s practical demonstration gives us an insight into the possession of relevant skills.”

### **Theme 5: Through Curriculum Vitae**

The result of the fifth major theme resulted from the analysis and interpretation of collected data from the semi-structured interview question: How did you discover the lack of employability skills in online degree holders who were unsuccessful during job placement and promotion decisions? The central theme occurred 15 times (75%) out of 20 HR experts who participated in the study. Figure 4 contains the emergent major theme and subthemes that resulted from data analysis of the responses from 20 participants.

Ndidi responded that “When you check their curriculum vitae for practical experience, you discover that they lack the requisite skills. For fresh graduates, when you ask them to have you done this before? They start struggling with answers. Both face to face and the online education is not satisfying 100% every aspect of embedding employability skills especially the technical courses.”



*Figure 4.* Discovery of skills gap.

Enyerebie, Sochi, Amarachi, and Chinonye agreed with a lack of practical experience particularly entry level job applicants. They opined that most job applicants whether face to face or online degree holders lack practical experiences during job interviews. For example, Amarachi responded: “There is a difference between recruiting a fresher who may not have enough employability skills and those who are expected to come in at management level or higher level of employment with huge experiences or talents for the job.” According to Sochi, “When you are interviewing, he or she will surely come with the theoretical knowledge of marketing, but the practical aspect may not be there. Marketing also has practical, when you ask for practical experiences, he or she may not have, but again this happens for both online and face to face degree holders.”

**Failure to answer interview questions.** The subtheme of failure to answer interview questions came from data analysis and interpretation of collected data from semi-structured interview questions. The subtheme appeared four times (20%) out of the 20 participants that took part in the case study. Uche and Chikwere opined that communication challenges could lead to a job applicant missing a job placement opportunity. According to Chikwere, a candidate for a marketing job that cannot speak fluently in English during a job interview will miss a hiring opportunity. For Uche, “it is not a question of the degree you have, you need to convince the interview panel that you understood their demand. We have recruited medical doctors who ended up becoming HR managers. We have a case where a medical doctor ended up becoming an HR director.”

### **Summary**

In chapter 4, the following issues were addressed; (a) demographics, (b) research setting, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, (e) evidence of trustworthiness, and as well as main themes and categories description. The collected data came from the responses of 20 HR professionals in Nigeria who been involved in recruitment for up to 5 years and above. Through a face-to-face and phone interview, responses were presented to understand how HR managers identified the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online degrees during job placement and promotion decisions. In chapter 5, the following issues were addressed; (a) interpretation, (b) analysis of findings, (c) recommendation, and (d) the implication for social change.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The challenges HR professionals face while identifying employability skills among online degree holders has become a global concern (Blackmore et al., 2016). Employers' decisions to hire online degree holders is subject to their interpretation of online degree credibility (James, Larry, & Terry, 2015; Roberto, & Johnson, 2017), which could result in bias in a selection process (Cai, 2013). In Nigeria, the reliability of online degree skills has a low rating, resulting in low employability among online degree holders (Agbebaku, & Adavbiele, 2016). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how HR professionals identify the employability skills of online degree holders.

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to explore how HR management professionals in Nigeria identified the possession of employability skills by online degree holders during their employment and promotion decisions. I conducted face-to-face and telephone semistructured interviews with 20 recruiters from Nigeria. The results may help the Nigerian Federal Government consider online education as one of the ways to address unemployment in the country and managing the high cost of establishing brick and mortar universities.

During data analysis, I used the NVivo 12 software in the organization of data to form the codes and themes. The major research question in the study was “How do HR managers identify the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online

degrees during job placement and promotion decisions?” The identified themes from the semistructured interviews to answer this question are in Table 4.

Table 4

*Themes and Subthemes from Interviews*

Emergent themes	Emergent subthemes
Demonstrated employability skills	Discovery of relevant skills
Showed poor possession of technical skills	Hard skills shortage
Degree type not a major consideration in recruitment decisions	Does not form determinant factor
Affects perception of applicant's employability	Generates bias during recruitment
Communication skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, marketing skills, interpersonal skills, attitude skills, and teamwork skills.	Soft skills
Data analysis skills, engineering skills, systems and process development skills, solving technical engineering problem skills, evaluation of operational performance skills.	Hard skills
Resume, previous work experiences, and answers to interview questions.	Face-to-face interviews
Computer based tests, aptitude tests, telephone interviews, and references.	Technology-based strategies
Probationary job recruitment	Short-term job placement
Resume, lack of practical work experience	Lack of practical experiences
Poor answers to interview questions	Failure to address interview questions

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In this section, I present the themes generated from the semistructured interviews and document reviews. The study's findings matched some themes with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. There was a support of the findings of previous literature and the conceptual framework.

### Question 1

As an HR management professional who has recruited face-to-face and online degree holders, what is your experience concerning possession of employability skills by online degree holders during recruitment and promotion decisions?

**Theme 1: Discovery of relevant skills.** Theme 1 has three aspects that confirmed and extended research findings in the literature: (a) the discovery, (b) relevant skills, and (c) going beyond mere perception. These aspects are closely linked and help to evaluate online degree holders during recruitment and promotion decisions.

**Discovery.** The discovery of online degree holders' relevant skills by participants in this study supports and extends the findings of previous research such as Fitó et al.'s (2014) study, which suggested how recruiters discovered that online degree holders reached better competency levels. Further, although prior studies have been focused on the acceptability of online degrees versus face-to-face degrees (Adams, 2016; Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017), this study went further to reveal how recruiters who already employed online degree holders discovered employability skills. For example, previous research has suggested the factors that led to poor online degree acceptability such as personal experience, institution type, and interaction benefits (Adams, 2016), but the current study's results showed the lived experiences of recruiters' discovery of employability skills in online degree holders.

**Relevant skills.** Eighty percent of the participants found relevant skills in online degree holders during and after recruitment decisions that are supported by previous research. For instance, Fitó et al. (2014) found relevant skills such as time management

and information management skills in online degree holders. The relevant skills found by 80% of the participants in this study covered a range of skills found in 10 different sectors and industries. The broad coverage of skills expanded on previous research findings on employability skills found in online degree holders.

***Mere perception.*** The results of this study also differed from research on employability skills of online degree holders. For example, a study of 24 HR specialists from Istanbul focused on perceptions of HR experts and comparison of online and face-to-face degree holders (Erden, & Tekarslan, 2014). Studies of HR experts in Kentucky (Grossman, & Johnson, 2017) and the Arab region (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017) have also noted HR perception. The perceptions of employers play a strong role in how the labor market view the employability competencies of graduates (Cai, 2014). However, employers' views may be wrong when dealing with graduates from cultures and backgrounds that employers are unfamiliar with (Cai, 2014). The results of this study show that mere perception is not enough for judging the quality of online degrees. The discovery of employability skills in all online degree holders by Nigerian recruiters in this study has shown that negative perceptions can be wrong.

**Hard skills shortage.** This study's results on a shortage of skills supported and extended the results of previous research such as a study by Balaraman and Kamalakannan (2016) that indicated a hard skills shortage in Indian aerospace regarding (a) basic and fundamental technical theories, (b) technical and practical skills, and (c) inspection and maintenance of equipment. Participants from the medical and aviation sector in the current study echoed the lack of these hard skills in online degree holders.

The participants' affirmed that they would not hire an online degree holder to pilot an aircraft without practical experience. Participants from the health sector also stated that they may not consider a job applicant with an online degree in medicine without practical experience.

In contrast to these results, prior research in Nigeria on online nursing degree holders from National Open University of Nigeria indicated that online nursing graduates possessed a high level of professional competence and met or exceeded employers' expectations (Ofoha, & Iwuchukwu, 2018). Additionally, Sitompul et al. (2017) explained that recruiters see hard skills as tangible and technical skills and are specific, countable, and definable that requires practical demonstration. This may affect how recruiters assess whether online degree holders have necessary hard skills.

## **Question 2**

How would you describe the role of degree type in identifying employability skills during recruitment and promotion decisions?

**Theme 2: Does not form the determinant factor.** The second theme also supported previous research findings. For example, Chebl and El Rayess (2017) suggested that degree type does not determine the possession or superiority of employability skills, as academic library employers indicated that online degree holders could demonstrate better communication skills more than face-to-face degree holders. This theme also extends previous research such as Grossman and Johnson's (2017) findings that degree type does not form the determinant factor in recruitment decisions. The participants' response that degree type does not form the basis of their recruitment

and promotion decision is a new insight in Nigeria. The findings of this study also disconfirm Agbebaku and Adavbiele's (2016) findings that indicated a low rating of online degree type regarding reliability and legality of online education. The result of this study on the experiences of recruiters who have already employed online degree holders did not support these previous findings.

**Generates bias in recruitment.** The theme of bias generation in recruitment agreed with Grossman and Johnson (2017), who found that some HR managers hold preconceived ideas about an applicant's degree type. The participants in this study also stated that when they find that a degree was from an online education platform, it creates some bias because of their preconceived notions from negative publicity. However, the online degree holders already working with the participants in this study showed that this bias and perception is wrong. In recommending ways recruiters can handle this bias on online degree type, Cai (2013) recommended that employers should base employability skills search on a thorough investigation of the employee's overall background.

### **Question 3**

What kind of employability skills have you identified in online degree holders as a recruiter before job placement or promotion decisions?

**Theme 3: Soft skills.** This study's findings of soft skills in online degree holders confirmed other research results in the literature. Chebl and El Rayess (2017) found better communications skills and better networking with information professionals in online degree holders. Fitó et al. (2014) also found employability skills in holders of online degrees such as leadership and teamwork skills. However, Fitó et al. were focused

only on BMA graduates in Europe and Chebl and El Rayess were focused on academic library employers. The results of this study also extended the information on soft skills that online degree holders have in different sectors. The study covered 10 different sectors in Nigeria and provided more skills found in online degree holders.

**Hard skills.** The theme of discovering hard skills in online degree holders extended other research. In their study about hard skills in the United States, Fan et al. (2017) categorized hard skills into science, mathematics, technological design skills, and analyzing data, which are similar categories that the participants in this study used. However, the results of this study also showed other hard skills such as systems and process development skills, solving technical problem skills, and computer literacy skills. This may explain the difference between hard skills shortage as explained by participants in the aviation industry and hard skills found by employers in other sectors because of different categorizations employers and stakeholders give to different hard skills (Patacsil, & Tablatin, 2017).

#### **Question 4**

What strategies did you use to discover employability skills in holders of online degrees before job placement and promotion decisions?

**Theme 4: Face-to-face interviews.** This theme extended the results of previous studies such as Deterding and Pedulla's (2016) findings that indicated employers screen for credential to determine future performance. In this study, participants explained how they got their insight into the employability skills of online degree holders through face-to-face interviews and screenings. This theme also supports the conceptual framework of

schooling and recruitment used in this study (Bills, 2003). The results of this study also extend the study of Gaskell and Mills (2014), which explained that face-to-face screening and interviews are some of the ways to understand how online higher institutions change people who are without physical interaction or have limited physical interaction.

**Technology-based recruitment strategies.** This theme also confirms earlier research. Mohapatra and Sahu (2017) found that analytics is useful for recruiters to have a deeper knowledge of the employability skills of job candidates and understand whether job applicants can be a right fit into their organizations. Technology-based recruitment strategies such as data analytics are being used more for identifying employability skills. Though there could be some challenges in the operational efficiency of using analytics in recruitment, these strategies can remove the disadvantages of traditional interviewing.

**Short-term job placement.** Previous research has also indicated the use of short-term job placement, which supports this theme. Pegg and Caddell (2016) found that short-term job placements or internships make it easy for employers to have first-hand experience regarding the capabilities of employees. Artess et al. (2017) also found the usefulness of short-term job placement, suggesting that the involvement of external stakeholders as employability skills networking strategy is one of the ways to discover employability skills. Finally, Drange et al. (2018) suggested that the engagement of job applicants supported graduate skills discovery.

### **Question 5**

How did you discover the lack of employability skills in online degree holders who were unsuccessful during job placement and promotion decisions?



**Theme 5: Through curriculum vitae.** Theme 5 has three aspects that confirmed and extended findings in the literature: (a) resume content, (b) practical experience, and (c) skills demonstration. The three aspects suggest why a job applicant may not be accepted or why staff are not promoted.

**Resume content.** The discovery of job applicants missing a job or promotion opportunity because of poor resume content parallels and extends the results of Kavar et al. (2017), Smith et al. (2014), and Jonte et al. (2016). Just as the participants from the health and aviation sectors noted the role of a resume, Smith et al. explained that some resume contents attract employers and lead to promotion opportunities such as education and training, licensure and certifications, and honors and awards. Other resume contents are professional employments, presentations, research, professional affiliations and activities, publications, teaching experience, and rotations (Smith et al., 2014, p. 2115-2117). As some of the participants explained, although degree type is not the determinant factor, resume content should attract a recruiter.

**Practical experience.** The participants also provided information about the lack of practical experience by job applicants with online and face-to-face degrees. Jonte et al. (2016) concluded that the inability to convince recruiters of practical job experience could lead to missing opportunities. Smith et al. (2014) also found that professionals need to continuously update their practical job experience to satisfy recruiters' decisions. As participants in this study stated, practical experiences are required by recruiters in technical skills, and without practical experiences, such applicants and employees may not have a job opportunity.

***Skills demonstration.*** The results from this study also supported previous research on skills demonstration. For example, Jackson (2016) found that job applicants should be able to demonstrate the ability to transfer skills from the university into the work place. The participants in this study found that fresh graduates often failed to demonstrate the skills they claimed to have during interviews. Communication and leadership skill are some the areas of skills gap (Chebl, & El Rayess, 2017). Fogle and Elliot (2013) noted that online graduates could demonstrate leadership and teamwork skills through the competencies they gained from collaborative projects and volunteer work.

**Failure to answer interview questions.** This theme paralleled the results of the study of Van De Mieroop (2018), which showed that applicants in some cases could not give satisfactory answers. This may be because those interviewing for jobs will typically answer from their point of view (Koivunen et al., 2015). Participants in the study found that some of those who were unsuccessful answered from their perspectives and did not provide what the recruiter wanted.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Research limitations are intents and procedural weaknesses in a given study (Mitchell, & Jolly, 2013). Limitations are also aspects that are out of the control of the researcher (Simon, & Goes, 2018). In this study, some of the limitations include my choice of qualitative case study with reliance on semistructured interviews. Another limitation of the study was that I did not get a truly random sample of HR professionals with a range in employability skills identification in online degree holders. Getting the

participants' honest and sincere responses and within a given time was another thing that limits the study. Some of the participants also changed their appointments with me several times.

The choice of 10 industry sample size became another limitation as skills requirement varies across different industries and sectors. Regardless of any limitation, I strove to carry out the study in a way that could minimize personal bias. Regarding dependability, the research utilized member checking and transcripts. I do not guarantee that the findings will have generalizable applicability to all industries and sectors. To reduce the chances of compromise, I provided clear and detailed information to participants through the informed consent form. The informed consent form and the results of the study will be kept confidential without revealing participants' identities.

### **Recommendations**

The inspiration for this study came from the low perception and acceptability of online degrees in Nigeria (Agbebaku, & Adavbiele, 2016; Yakasai, 2017), a country whose face to face universities cannot admit above 30% of yearly university admission seekers (Igbape, & Oduntan, 2017). I decided to gain insight into the problem of how HR in Nigeria identify the possession or otherwise of employability skills by online degree holders. The recommendations, therefore, will precisely be of interest to online graduates, online higher institutions, and seekers of online education, employers, and policy makers, especially in Nigeria. For future research, the recommendations are wider and cover such areas as methodology, social science, and public policy.

**Online Degree holders**

The results of this study indicate that HR experts identified various employability skills in online degree holders via traditional interviews, technological recruitment processes, and short term practical job placements. Online degree holders with first degree in particular should note that HR experts are more concerned on their overall skills set (Ayo, Odukoya, & Azeta, 2014). They are to ensure that their curriculum vitae and experiences at job interview is an opportunity to provide every skill both from education background and other experiences. They are to be confident of their degrees as HR experts' practical experiences with online degree holders are at variance with mere perceptions in many research papers.

They are to prepare rich curriculum vitae that showcase their skills and put forward every competence gotten from online education and other sources. Those with an online degree in public health, for example, should develop strong confidence as Nigerian HR practical experiences found such degree holders to come with high level professional competencies (Ofoha, & Iwuchukwu, 2018). Online degree holders who are already working as this study found should become agents of encouragement to others regarding HR experts' high rating.

**Online Higher Institutions**

On the other hand, online institutions could learn from the findings of this research particularly the fears expressed by HR experts in the aviation and medical sectors. The results of this study indicate that HR experts do not believe that practical skills in piloting and medical practice will come through only online education. Online

institutions could collaborate with other institutions that have a face to face training in medicine, engineering, aerospace and other technical programs. They could seek for the establishment of solid collaboration with such departments in face to face universities. The findings of this research does not mean that every skill in the aviation and medical sectors will require a face to face learning environment. Again, online higher institutions could package programs that incorporate HR experts and line managers and in such a way that enhances a change of their negative perception. Another recommendation is that online higher institutions should work to improve their reputations and get necessary program accreditations as most HR experts rely on such for decision making.

### **The Government**

At the government level, public policy makers could make use of the findings of this study to see online education as one viable and valuable option to increase access to higher education and embed employability skills in the teeming crowd of those without admission in Nigeria. The current rate of admission into higher institutions in Nigeria which is below 30% (Igbape, & Oduntan, 2017), calls for an understanding of the possibilities of closing the skills gap in the country through online higher education. The Nigeria Universities Commission said that only 1% of the Nigerian population is in the university admission bracket. Identifying employability skills in online degree holders should encourage positive public policy decisions to encourage the establishment of online universities in Nigeria. The funds and costs of establishing more face to face universities in Nigeria to accommodate the yearly shortfall of 70% of students without admission makes the task a difficult or even near impossible task. Nigerian universities

could establish online departments and learn from well-established universities like Liverpool University who use their online departments to close the skills gap.

### **Seekers of Online Education**

Another recommendation from the results of this study is that those seeking to invest into online education should not base their decisions on negative perceptions but practical and empirical results from HR experts' experiences with online degree holders. The participants in this study already have online degree holders in their employment and such engagements should be a source of encouragement to go ahead with their investment decisions. According to the results of this study and similar studies especially for those who are already working, online education has become one major option to upgrade and fill up the skills gap in the work place (Allen et al., 2016). As some of the participants indicated, they had negative perceptions regarding online degrees until they were proved wrong by the performances of such degree holders.

### **Future Researchers**

Regarding future research, I will recommend that researchers expand the size of the population and look at such participants as line managers, who have direct encounters with the performances of online degree holders in the workplace. The HR experts in this study may not have had daily practical job performance encounters with online degree holders after the initial recruitment and promotion decisions. Again, researchers in Nigeria and other countries should move beyond researching on mere perceptions of stakeholders about online degrees and investigate practical experiences with online degree holders.

## **Employers**

The findings of this study indicate that employers are to go beyond negative perceptions and identify the rich skills found in holders of online degrees. As most participants in this study opined, such degree holders come in as products of current research, have continuous learning skills, and are in some cases better than face to face degree holders. Again, to remove opinions that come from ignorance of the rigor in online education, HR experts could enroll and further their skills gap through online learning. As the findings of this study showed, HR experts should rely on the overall employability factors in a job applicant and staff promotions and not to base such decisions on only degree type.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

The findings of this study have already sown a seed of positive social change in different areas as the field interviews sparked an interest in HR experts regarding the potentials of online degrees in solving some of the Nigerian education problems. A participant in this study and member of the HR body in Nigeria (CIPM) has asked me to present the results of this study before the larger house to enhance better understanding of the potentials of online degrees. Again, I hope to make presentations in conferences in some professional bodies such as associations of online degree holders in Nigeria.

The results and knowledge gained from this study will be shared with public officials and scholars such as the Nigerian Universities Commission to enhance the exploration of online education departments in competent Nigerian universities. The over one million candidates without admission into universities in Nigeria every year could

receive help when the results of this study are made public. As it stands, there seem not to be a solution in view in Nigeria in addressing the inability of face to face universities to accommodate the teeming population of admission seekers into higher institutions. Understanding the employability skills that online degree holders possess could encourage policy decisions in establishing more online education within the Nigerian space.

The findings of this research could spark and move ongoing debates on online degrees from the angle of mere perceptions of stakeholders to that of practical experiences with online degree holders. Prior research and debates focused on perceptions of employers, perceptions of governments and policy makers, perceptions of students, and perceptions of online education administrators. One better way of spreading the potentials of online degree holders could be through exposing the employability skills found in those currently engaged or promoted in their work places. While those who hold negative perceptions about online degrees are arguing and debating, those with positive and practical experiences with online degree holders must not keep quiet.

Finally, sharing the knowledge gained from this research could encourage seekers of online degrees and those hoping to upgrade their employability skills in order to enhance better performance in their organizations. Most people are discouraged by negative perceptions regarding the usefulness of their online degrees and how employers value such degrees, particularly in Nigeria. The knowledge of how online degree holders are excelling and valued by their employers, peers, and their organizations could motivate and encourage more desire and enrollments into online education. Again, the knowledge



of how employers identify employability skills in online degree holders could equip others on better preparations and readiness for recruitment and promotion opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

The government, practitioners, employers, seekers of online higher education, and online higher institutions can make the society a better place by moving beyond mere perceptions of online degrees to knowing the employability skills holders of such degrees bring on board. This research investigated how HR experts identified the presence or absence of employability skills in online degree holders in Nigeria. The results of the study indicate that recruiters do not base their recruitment and promotion decisions on degree type. Recruiters in this study identified various soft and hard skills in holders of online degrees but needed more work from online institutions regarding the skills of those in medical and aviation programs.

Additionally, HR experts used such strategies as traditional recruiting and promotion methods to identify employability skills in online degree holders. Some of the traditional strategies include face to face interview and screening, technology based recruiting systems, and short-term job placements. Some HR experts used curriculum vitae, personal carriage, and inability to address interview and promotion questions as the strategies for identifying the absence of employability skills. The results demand that holders of online degrees should do proper packaging and presentation of their skills during the recruitment and promotions decisions.

The key findings of this study, according to participants' responses, include that online degrees are acceptable to HR experts in Nigeria from different sectors. Another

key finding is that the awareness of the skills and resources brought in by online degree holders into the workplace needs to increase. As the participants' responses showed, another key finding is that online degree holders come in with useful skills that can help in addressing the skills gap in the workplace. Consideration of the findings of this research together with prior literature indicates that stakeholders should learn from the experience of Amara one of the participants who is a member of the council of CIPM and recruiting consultant in Nigeria. According to Amara:

Online degree holders come in as products of current research, Online degree holders come in with much information at their disposal and wider exposure, Online degree holders are perpetually linked and connected to their institutions even after graduation, They are continuous learners and use constant improvements; They can have access to their institutions' library for further research and advancement.

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## Appendix A: Initial Interview Protocol before Experts Revision

Responses from three Walden university qualitative research subject matter experts who will volunteer to revise the questions will help in shaping the research/interview questions:

### **Research Question**

One major research question will apply to the study: How do human resource managers identify the presence or absence of employability skills in holders of online degrees during job placement and promotion decisions?

### **Interview Questions before Revisions**

1) What is your experience concerning employability skills from online degree holders during recruitment and promotion decisions?

2) What is your evaluation regarding online degree holders' possession of employability skills?

3) What kind of skills did you find in online degree holders before job placement or promotion decisions?

4) How did you discover the employability skills in online degree holders? OR

5) What strategies did you use to discover employability skills in holders of online degrees before job placement and promotion decisions?

6) How did you discover the lack of employability skills in online degree holders before job placement and promotion decisions?

7) How can you explain your experience with the job performance of online degree holders in your establishment?



8) Which of the following specific employability skills did online degree holders demonstrate in your workplace?

- (a) Personal skills and attitude,
- (b) Teamwork skills
- (c) Communication and computational skills,
- (d) Problem-solving/Decision making skills
- (e) Technological literacy,
- (f) Self-employability skills,
- (g) Broad or specific occupational skills, and
- (h) Lifelong learning skills,
- (i) Critical thinking skills,
- (j) Other skills, please specify.

8) What do you consider as a major factor that enabled an online degree holder scale through your recruitment and promotion decisions?

9) What factors made unsuccessful online degree job applicants unable to pass your recruitment and promotion decisions?

10) What other factors besides degree type did enhance or limit the chances of online degree holder's job placement or promotion chances in your establishment?

It is hoped that three qualitative research subject matter experts will give their feedback on the above initial interview protocol. Such comments, feedbacks and responses will be incorporated to update the final interview questions to generate useful data that will address the research question.

Appendix B: Final Interview Protocol after Experts Revision

1. As an HR management professional who have recruited face to face and online degree holders, what is your experience concerning possession of employability skills by online degree holders during recruitment and promotion decisions?
2. How would you describe the role of degree type in identifying employability skills during recruitment and promotion decisions?
3. What kind of employability skills have you identified in online degree holders as a recruiter before job placement or promotion decisions?
4. What strategies did you use to discover employability skills in holders of online degrees before job placement and promotion decisions?
5. How did you discover the lack of employability skills in online degree holders who were unsuccessful during job placement and promotion decisions?