

Entrepreneurial skills required of vocational and technical education graduates for small scale enterprise operation in an economy under recession

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to determine the entrepreneurial skills required of Vocational and Technical Education graduates for small scale enterprise operation in Rivers State. Three research questions guided the study and one null hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance. A descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population consisted of 760 small scale entrepreneurs in Rivers State and a sample size of 228 entrepreneurs was selected through the proportionate random sampling technique. A 27-item structured questionnaire titled Entrepreneurial Skills and Small-Scale Enterprises Operation Questionnaire (ESSSEQ) was used for the Study. The instrument was validated by three experts. Cronbach's Alpha method was used to establish the reliability of the instrument in a pilot test, which yielded a reliability co-efficient of 0.78 which indicates that the instrument was reliable for the study. Data related to the research questions were analyzed using mean and standard deviation while ANOVA statistic was used to test the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. Findings from the study revealed that VTE graduates in Rivers State require managerial, marketing and cost control skills for successful operation of small-scale enterprises to a high extent.

The findings also revealed that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of respondents on the managerial skills required by VTE graduates for small scale enterprise operation in Rivers State on the basis of years of experience. The study concluded that entrepreneurial skills are more importantly required for successful operation of small-scale enterprises by both practicing and potential entrepreneurs in view of the current economic recession in the country. The study recommended that government through curriculum planners and developers should review curriculum of VTE in institutions to include relevant entrepreneurial skills to be learned by the students. The study also recommended that the government and administrators of VTE programmes should partner with small scale entrepreneurs to organize training programmes that will help equip VTE graduates with the requisite entrepreneurial skills. This can be done through the organization of conferences, seminars and workshops.

KEYWORDS

entrepreneurship skills; vocational and technical education; small scale enterprises; economic recession.

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty and unemployment, especially among the youth has been a global phenomenon. The rising rate of unemployment and the attendant poverty, particularly among the youth, have continued to be a major concern to governments in developed and developing societies, Nigeria inclusive. For instance, findings released by the Office of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2008 showed that youth aged (18-30) whom make up nearly half (47 percent) of the world's population are unemployed. In Nigeria, unemployment and poverty among the youth are on the rise. Supporting the above assertion, Onyebu (2014) found that the number of Nigerian youths not employed were over 50 percent. Onyebu further noted that over the years, the federal government has initiated various programmes aimed at eradicating unemployment and poverty especially among the teeming youth. Unfortunately, the poverty eradication programmes of the Federal Government have not yielded tangible results as Nigeria still ranks among the 25 poorest nations in the world despite its huge resources both material and human (Oba, 2012).

The present economic reality in the country shows that the situation has not improved in any way. The high rate of unemployment in the country could be attributed to lack of employment opportunities, as well as the unemployable

nature of Nigerian graduates (Nwanewezi, 2010). It seems that Nigerian graduates are not exposed to qualitative education that would empower them through entrepreneurship towards becoming self-reliant. In relation to eradicating poverty in the country, Oba (2012) asserted that the place of youth education and entrepreneurial programmes that would genuinely address and encourage youths to be involved in such practice are what the nation needs especially at this time of economic recession. Thus, the only way to empower the youth is to provide them with adequate and qualitative education in order to make them self-employed, job creators and to eradicate poverty in their various communities. Many countries of the world including Nigeria have considered Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) as relevant in equipping young people with necessary skills and competencies that would enable them engage in skill acquisition and productive livelihoods (Ekpenyoung, 2011).

VTE according to Onyenkwu in Obierika and Ezoem (2012) is defined as a facilitator of behavioural change in an individual or a learner towards skill acquisition. This is no doubt based on sound knowledge, its application to creative thinking, decision making and problem solving of societal needs thereby making a living out of them. VTE is seen as a specialized type of education that equips the individual or learner with all the necessary manipulative skills, attitudes, abilities and scientific knowledge that make the individual self-reliant and also able to solve problems (Edigin, 2010). It is further understood to be the type of education that is aimed at preparing learners/trainees to be able to fit into the world of work, engage in life-long learning, become responsible citizens, promoting environmentally sound sustainable development and ensuring poverty alleviation (FRN, 2004). In the context of this study, VTE is used to refer to an aspect of education that provides the recipients with basic knowledge and practiced skills required for entry into the world of work either as employees or self-employed. It is a type of education designed for preparing the individual learner to earn a living. It is expected that VTE students upon graduation can establish their own small-scale enterprises instead of searching for white collar jobs which are not readily available. The establishment of these small-scale enterprises would indeed help to salvage the country from the shackles of unemployment and poverty which have been a clog to economic progress and development.

Defining a small-scale enterprise is undoubtedly a difficult task because the definition varies from country to country and from one time to another in the same country depending on the pattern and stage of development and government policy. However, evidence from literature shows that in defining small-scale enterprises, reference is usually made to some quantifiable variables such as number of employees, capital outlay, the annual turnover and the asset value of the enterprise or a combination of any of these variables (Aremu, 2010; & Payton, 2012). The National Economic Reconstruction Fund (NERFUND) in Etebefia and Akinkumi (2013) defined small-scale enterprises as those enterprises whose fixed asset and cost of new investment does not exceed N10million. In the same vein, the National Council on Industry in Osotimehin and Olajide (2012) defined small scale enterprises as enterprises whose total cost, including working capital but excluding cost of land, is over N1million but not more than N40 million and a labor size of between 11 and 35 workers. However, small scale enterprises refer to those enterprises whose total fixed assets excluding working capital does not exceed N10million with total number of employees ranging from 5-25.

It must be noted that the level of industrial development expected to be generated through development of small-scale enterprises compared to the need of the country has never been achieved. It is on this basis that Ezeh (2011) reported that every year in Nigeria, a number of small-scale enterprises spring up but many eventually collapse within a short time frame. This situation has indeed worsened since the country started experiencing the recent economic recession which has eaten into the economy like a canker-worm. Recession can be defined as a situation where there is an economic crisis in a nation's economic activities, a situation where the world's economy seems to be standing on its head (Bryson, 2011). Jones (2013) also noted that economic recession is an economic situation characterized by abnormal increases in unemployment, falls in the availability of credit, shrinking output and investment, numerous bankruptcies, reduced amounts of trade and commerce, as well as highly volatile relative currency value fluctuations, mostly devaluations, financial crises and bank failure. It is a period of general economic decline and is typically accompanied by a drop in the stock market, an increase in unemployment, and a decline in the housing market. It is a period of general downturn in any economy often associated by high unemployment and collapse of many business establishments.

In view of the present economic recession in the country, there is no doubt that VTE graduates who are expected to venture into various small-scale enterprises require adequate entrepreneurial skills so as to be able to run these businesses successfully. According to Ademiluyi (2007), entrepreneurial skills are simply business skills which individuals acquire to enable them effectively function in the turbulent environment as an entrepreneur or self-employed. It is simply referred to sum total of all attributes and abilities required for successful operation of small-scale enterprises. Akinola (2001) also pointed out that it takes special skills to succeed as an entrepreneur. Erhurun (2007) also noted that most entrepreneurial skills come by learning and practicing.

Nevertheless, the various skills embedded in business related programmes need to be explored and learn by VTE graduates for them to succeed as entrepreneurs in an economy under recession.

Some of the entrepreneurial skills that could be required of VTE graduates for successful operation of various small-scale enterprises include managerial skills, marketing skills and cost control skills. Managerial skills here include the ability to manage time and meet job schedule; ability to demonstrate good supervisory skills; ability to encourage teamwork among employees; ability to set appropriate business goals and so on. Marketing skills according to Okpan (2006) include the ability to capture and retain customers' patronage, promote and sell the organizations' products, analyze demand and supply and so on. Cost control skills on the other hand include the ability to effectively allocate costs and prices to products; ability to effectively negotiate credit facility and so on.

One variable that could come into focus in the context of entrepreneurial skills acquisition and operation of small-scale enterprises is years of experience of the entrepreneurs. In fact, there is recognition in the literature of the significance of the contribution of entrepreneurial experience to venture performance (Sandra, 2014). Sandra noted that prior entrepreneurial experience can lead to success. Similarly, specific experience in similar businesses ensures survival and growth. It could be said however that the older the entrepreneurs are in their businesses, the more they are equipped to apply adequate entrepreneurial skills for successful operation of their business especially during the period of economic recession. Considering that the success or failure of VTE graduates in Rivers State to successfully venture into various small scale business ventures amidst the present economic recession in Nigeria depend to a large extent on their acquisition of appropriate entrepreneurial skills; it is essential to determine the entrepreneurial skills required by these graduates so as to ensure their survival and sustainable entrepreneurship development in the country.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Entrepreneurship is undoubtedly concerned with the process of recognizing a business opportunity, operating and maintaining that business. It is an obvious fact that people engage into it without acquiring much skills that will enable them to effectively operate the business with the attendant consequence of failure instead of success. Their failure according to Ezeani (2014) is not because they do not have the necessary capital and machines to stay afloat, but because they lack prerequisite skills needed to grow the business from a small position to a bigger one, and as well to remain in the business. In Nigeria, many financing policies were designed and implemented by successive government to boost the sector but the results contradicted expectations. Virtually no comparative study ever place Nigeria ahead of any of her co-developing countries in terms of small scale businesses performance and growth (Dajur, Bakle & Tuanyil, 2015).

The situation now is that most VTE graduates make little or no attempt to established small scale business of their own despite the abundant business opportunities in the country. Instead, they continued to run after white-collar jobs which are almost not in existence. Those that have even established one cannot even stand the taste of time in of lack of adequate entrepreneurial, skills and the present economic recession in the country. The question now is what entrepreneurial skills are required of VTE graduates for successful small-scale enterprises operation in Rivers State.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study was to determine the entrepreneurial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State.

Specifically, the study sought to determine the:

- (1) Managerial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State.
- (2) Marketing skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State.
- (3) Cost control skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

- (1) What are the managerial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State?
- (2) What are the marketing skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State?
- (3) What are the cost control skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State?

HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

- (1) Entrepreneurs of small-scale enterprises do not differ significantly in their mean ratings on managerial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State on the basis of years of experience (0-5years, 6-10years and 11years and above).

- (2) Entrepreneurs of small-scale enterprises do not differ significantly in their mean ratings on cost control skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State on the basis of years of experience (0-5years, 6-10years and 11years and above).

METHOD

Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The researchers considered this design appropriate for this study since it intended to collect data from entrepreneurs or managers of small-scale enterprises on the entrepreneurial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State. The population of the study consisted of 760 small scale entrepreneurs in Rivers State who are registered with the State chapter of National Association of Small-Scale Industries (NASSI). The sample size of this study comprised 228 small scale entrepreneurs which represents 30 percent of the population. The sample was selected through the proportionate random sampling technique based on the nature of their activities (Manufacturing, Agro-Allied and General Business and Services). Instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled Entrepreneurial Skills and Small-Scale Enterprises Operation Questionnaire (ESSSEOQ). The instrument was validated by three experts, two from the Department of Vocational Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and one expert who is a small-scale entrepreneur in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Their comments enhanced the content validity of the instrument. Cronbach's Alpha method was used to establish the reliability of the instrument in a pilot test, which yielded a reliability co-efficient of 0.78 which indicates that the instrument was reliable for the study. The questionnaire was structured on a four-point rating scale with response categories as "Strongly Agreed"; "Agreed"; "Disagreed" and "Strongly Disagreed". The administration of the instrument was carried out personally by the researchers with the aid of two research assistants. All copies of the questionnaire distributed were retrieved and used for data analysis. Data collected regarding the research questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) while the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistic was used to test the hypotheses. In order to determine the entrepreneurial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State, a decision rule based on a mean rating of 2.50 points was used. Therefore, items with mean ratings of 2.50 points and above were regarded as required by the entrepreneurs while items with mean ratings below 2.50 points were regarded as not required. In testing the hypotheses, a null hypothesis was accepted where the calculated F-value is less than the critical value of F. It means that there is no significant difference and the hypothesis will not be rejected. Conversely, where the calculated F-value is equal to or greater than the critical F-value, it means that there is significant difference and the hypothesis will be rejected.

RESULTS

Research Question 1:

What are the managerial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State? Data collected in response to the first research question were analyzed and presented in Table1.

TABLE 1: Mean ratings of entrepreneurs of small-scale enterprises on managerial skills required of VTE graduates in Rivers State. N=228

S/N	Managerial Skills	Mean	SD	Decision
(1)	Formulate specific objectives for the enterprise	3.70	0.64	Agreed
(2)	Communicate information clearly to employees	4.20	0.70	Agreed
(3)	Demonstrate good supervisory skills	4.00	0.45	Agreed
(4)	Undertake basic steps inn starting a business	4.10	0.40	Agreed
(5)	Coach or mentor employees well	4.10	0.54	Agreed
(6)	Demonstrate high level of commitment to customers' needs	4.00	0.75	Agreed
(7)	Encourage teamwork among employees	4.40	0.78	Agreed
(8)	Recognize individual employee's needs and desires	4.18	0.75	Agreed
(9)	Assist individual employees in developing their strengths	4.39	0.68	Agreed
(10)	Welcome creativity and innovations from employees	4.20	0.63	Agreed
Cluster Mean		4.13		Agreed

The result of the study in table one shows that all the items had their mean above cut of point of 2.50. Therefore, all the respondents used for the study agreed with these items as the managerial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State. The cluster mean of 4.13 revealed that respondents accepted all the items as the managerial skills required for operation of small-scale enterprises.

Research Question 2:

What are the marketing skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State? Data collected in response to the first research question were analyzed and presented in Table2.

TABLE 2: Mean ratings of entrepreneurs of small-scale enterprises on marketing skills required of VTE graduates in Rivers State. N=228

S/N	Marketing Skills	Mean	SD	Decision
(11)	Knowledge of seasonal fluctuation of goods	3.55	0.66	Agreed
(12)	Determine the products customers wants	4.04	0.60	Agreed
(13)	Demonstrate good supervisory skills	4.10	0.55	Agreed
(14)	Knowledge of how to capture and retain customers' patronage	4.20	0.64	Agreed
(15)	Promote and sell the enterprises' products	3.10	0.44	Agreed
(16)	Determine the extent to which products will sell	3.00	0.65	Agreed
(17)	Knowledge of various aspects of sales and salesmanship	3.60	0.68	Agreed
(18)	Knowledge of advertising	3.15	0.75	Agreed
(19)	ability to carry out good marketing and information research	4.08	.058	Agreed
(20)	Ability to analyze demand and supply situation	3.30	0.48	Agreed
Cluster Mean		3.61		Agreed

The result of the study in table one shows that all the items had their mean above cut of point of 2.50. Therefore, all the respondents used for the study agreed with these items as the marketing skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State. The cluster mean of 3.61 revealed that respondents accepted all the items as the marketing skills required for operation of small-scale enterprises.

Research Question 3:

What are the cost control skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State? Data collected in response to the third research question were analyzed and presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Mean ratings of entrepreneurs of small-scale enterprises on cost control skills required of VTE graduates in Rivers State. N=228

S/N	Cost Control Skills Ability to:	Mean	SD	Decision
(21)	Effectively handle cash transactions to avoid financial loss	3.80	0.72	Agreed
(22)	Maintain record of financial transactions	4.02	0.68	Agreed
(23)	Ascertain cheaper sources of raw materials	3.74	0.64	Agreed
(24)	Ascertain sources of credit facilities with moderate interest rate	3.69	0.98	Agreed
(25)	Effectively management direct expenses	3.79	0.98	Agreed
(26)	Maintain steady cash flow	4.02	0.95	Agreed
(27)	Effectively allocate costs to products	4.05	0.79	Agreed
Cluster Mean		3.90		Agreed

The result of the study in table one shows that all the items had their mean above cut of point of 2.50. Therefore, all the respondents used for the study agreed with these items as the cost control skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State. The cluster mean of 3.90 revealed that respondents accepted all the items as the cost control skills required for operation of small-scale enterprises.

TESTING THE HYPOTHESIS

Null Hypothesis

Entrepreneurs of small-scale enterprises do not differ significantly in their mean ratings on managerial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State on the basis of years of experience (0-5years, 6-10years and 11years and above).

This null hypothesis was tested using z-test 0.05 level of significance. The results are indicated in Table 4.

TABLE 4: Analysis of variance on mean ratings of entrepreneurs on the managerial skills required of VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P-value
Between Groups	45.10	2	22.55	2.19	0.11
Within Groups	2562.84	225	10.29		
Total	2607.94	227			

The analysis in Table 4 showed that there was no significant difference among the three groups in terms of their mean ratings on the managerial skills required by VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation in Rivers State on the basis of years of experience (0-5, 6-10 and above 11 years and above), as the F-ratio (2, 249) was 2.19 and P-value (.11) was greater than the stipulated 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of the study revealed that entrepreneurs of small-scale enterprises in Rivers State indicated that VTE graduates require all the managerial skills indicated for successful operation of small-scale enterprise to a high extent. The study revealed that managerial skills required by VTE graduates for small scale enterprises operation to include ability to communicate information clearly to employees, ability to demonstrate good supervisory skills, ability to encourage teamwork among employees and so on. This finding is in agreement with Binuomote and Okoli (2015) who identified some important managerial skills required by Business Education Graduates to successfully establish, run and manage a business enterprise to include the ability to set appropriate business goals, organize effectively, make appropriate use of feedback amongst others. It thus implies that lack of adequate managerial skills is a hindrance to operation of entrepreneurial businesses. This is in line with Osuala (2009) who identified management incompetency as one of the specific reasons for business failure since managers do not have what it simply takes to run a small business. There is no doubt that one of the threats to entrepreneurial success especially during economic recession is lack of managerial skills and experience. Thus, entrepreneurs should have good training in the art of management. Furthermore, the result of hypothesis revealed that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of respondents on the managerial skills required by VTE graduates for small scale enterprise operation in Rivers State on the basis of years of experience.

The analysis presented on Table 2 also showed that respondents generally agreed that all the marketing skills are required by VTE graduates for successful operation of small-scale enterprises in Rivers State. Some of marketing skills identified in the study include ability to determine what the customers' want, ability to capture and retain customers' patronage, knowledge of advertising and so on. This is supported by Ezeh (2011) who identified entrepreneurial marketing skills to include ability to determine current and future trends in the sales of products, familiarity with various aspects of sales and salesmanship, ability to budget and forecast and so on.

The findings presented on Table 3 showed that entrepreneurs of small-scale enterprises generally agreed that VTE graduates require cost control skills for successful operation of small-scale enterprises in Rivers State. This is in consonance Olusanya, Awotungase and Ohadere (2012) whose study on cost control skills needs of small business entrepreneurs in Lagos State revealed that effective cost control skills are essential for successful operation of small business operation and hence required by entrepreneurs. Some of the cost control skills identified in this study include

ability to effectively allocate costs and prices to products, ascertain cheaper sources of raw materials, and effectively manage direct expenses, and so on. On the same note, the findings were consistent with Esuh (2012) who agreed that graduates of tertiary institutions require a number of cost control skills to be able to establish and run their businesses successfully. Esuh identified some cost control skills required for successful operation of small and medium scale enterprises include ability to allocate cost, ability to fix prices relative to industry price and ability to prepare realistic budgets.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that respondents agreed on the entire gamut of managerial, marketing and cost control skills as required by VTE graduates for small scale enterprise operation in Rivers State. Furthermore, these entrepreneurial skills are more importantly required by both practicing and potential entrepreneurs in view of the current economic recession in the country. Also, the years of experience of the entrepreneurs do not significantly influence their mean ratings of the managerial skills required by VTE graduates for small scale enterprise operation in Rivers State.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) There is need for a collaborative relationship between entrepreneurs and VTE lecturers to ensure that students acquire requisite entrepreneurial skills that would enable them set up various small-scale entrepreneurial ventures upon graduation.
- (2) Government through curriculum planners and developers should review curriculum of VTE in institutions to include relevant entrepreneurial skills to be learned by the students.
- (3) The government and administrators of VTE programmes should partner with small scale entrepreneurs to organize training programmes that will help equip VTE graduates with the requisite entrepreneurial skills. This can be done through the organization of conferences, seminars and workshops.

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