

MANAGERS' RATING OF PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS NEEDED BY BUSINESS EDUCATION GRADUATES FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN IMO STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study ascertained problem solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State. One research question guided the study while two null hypotheses were tested. The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The study was carried out in Imo State. The population of the study comprised 130 SMEs registered with the Imo State chamber of Commerce and Industry as at 2019. The entire population of 130 registered SMEs was used for the study since the size was considered manageable. Data for the study were collected using a validated research questionnaire. Cronbach Alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument which yielded a reliability coefficient value of 0.81. Arithmetic mean and standard deviation was used to answer research question and determine the homogeneity or otherwise of the respondents' ratings. The t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that problem-solving skills are highly needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that business education graduates should attend more workshops, seminars, and conferences that emphasizes on the importance of problem solving skills for sustainability of SMEs

Keywords: Business Education, Problem Solving skills, Sustainability, SMEs

Introduction

Education has been described as the greatest facilitator of change as it moves individuals and nations from where they are to where they want to be. Education includes activities which enable man to acquire, develop and utilize knowledge, skills and attitudes for the benefits of self and the society. This also entails upgrading, for the purpose of improvement of existing knowledge, skills and values in the light of new socio-economic circumstances obtained in the world over. Education could be general or specific when it is vocationally or occupationally oriented. This should be done not only through the formal school setting, but also through the non-formal arrangement that will impact on members of the society who are out of school and in the world of work (Okoli & Okoli, 2021).

Education is of quality if meaningful, worthwhile and responsive to individuals and social needs. It is a functional one when it is used to address or solve societal problems, satisfy

the needs of its recipients and the nation at large. It provides the learners with the capabilities they require to become economically productive and independent develop sustainable livelihood, contribute to societal peace and democracy that enhances individual wellbeing (Okoli & Okoli, 2021). Quality education is crucial in empowerment of the citizens, as it strengthens them and the community in general to have more control over their resources and situations, to combat poverty and inequality in the society. Academic programmes are instituted at different education levels and at both formal and non-formal setting with learning experiences selected, organized and arranged in an orderly manner to achieve objectives directed towards solving these individual and societal problems. Business education programme is therefore instituted to serve these purposes.

Business education is a programme for and about business, providing its recipients with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable them to be employed (paid or self) and to progress in the world of work. Business education prepares its recipients for the world of business. The programme provides learning experiences in Secretarial education/Office Technology Management (OTM), accounting education, commerce, cooperative economics, marketing and management education. The National Policy on Education provided the objectives of business education at tertiary level of education as; to inculcate the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual in the Nigerian society; and encourage acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities, both mental and physical as requirement for the individual to live and contribute to development of his society, to develop a mature understanding of the general nature of business, to provide the needed background for teaching in business subjects, to provide training for leadership in business and to provide training in specialized phases of business activity (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). The goals of business education are to give training and impart the necessary skills to individuals who shall be economically self-reliant.

Business education as a discipline is expected to expose its recipients to diverse curricula, and inculcates in its recipients attitudes, knowledge, skills and values that is required in the business world (Ezeani, 2012). This is a means of producing a healthy, literate, self-reliant citizen that would create wealth when they become self-employed and for development of human resources that results to sustainable nations development at large. Equally, business education plays a prominent role in preparing students to become responsible citizens, capable of making astute economic decisions that will benefit their personal and professional lives. It equips the recipients with skills needed for business success.

Skills for operating a business enterprise are needed for the business to succeed in the competitive market. Evidently, possession of skills is important in preventing youths from becoming social misfits; because, these skilled persons become gainfully employed through vocational training and acquisition of skills. Skill is therefore the ability to do something well and is usually gained through training or experience. According to Okoli

and Ibeh (2017), skills encompass the abilities, capabilities, aptitude and expertise acquired through deliberate, systematic and sustained training, and necessary to adaptively perform job functions effectively. These skills are regarded as generic because they are readily transferable across different work settings. In the context of this study, skill means the ability to carry out specific functions which is gained through training or experience. It is important to note that when business education graduates are empowered through the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills, there is the possibility that the skills are used to create new avenues for wealth (Ihebereme, 2010). Akpotowoh and Amahi in Okoli and Okoli (2021) opined that the skills required in any of the area of business related programme promotes training in entrepreneurship as well as equip graduates with requisite skills establish and run small businesses of their own. Business education graduates must possess these business skills that are necessary to enable them start, finance their own business enterprises and market the products or services. Egwanyenga and Ranor (2012) also enumerated entrepreneurial skills needed for business operation as follows: accounting and financial competency skills, marketing skills, problem-solving skills, and general business skills. For the purpose of this study, problem solving skills will be put into consideration because it is a key skill needed by a business owner to identify and solve economic problems which brings about the sustainability of the business.

Problem-solving skills are very important entrepreneurial skills which guarantee success in operating an enterprise. Ajaero (2006) stated that problem-solving skills for entrepreneurial development involve critical thinking, understanding of the business, team spirit, decisiveness and courage. Acquisition of this skill would enable graduates of business education to identify business problems and become critical thinkers so as to turn the identified business problems into opportunities. A business is built on problems and challenges to provide needs and wants of customers. Problem-solving skills are therefore very important tools for success in operating an enterprise. Oduma (2010) noted that employers of labour considered the possession of problem solving skills among business graduates high relevant for their success in business. Inculcating these problem-solving skills among graduates of business education therefore becomes imperative to build in them the abilities, values and attitudes for meaningful living necessary to achieving sustainable development.

Sustainability involves reducing waste and unnecessary energy, fuel and other inputs and all other actions taken to improve a business. According to Ben-Eli (2018), sustainability means maintaining good relationship with customers, suppliers and the immediate environment of the business. When this is achieved, the business stands a better chance of success and growth and can equally save SMEs cost.

Small businesses otherwise referred to as small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are considered as one of the most critical sectors that grow nations through socio-economic

developments. SMEs are essential to any economy because they create economic development and providing products and services, create value in the economy and drive industrialization. Adeusi (2015), noted that SMEs occupy a place of pride in virtually every country or state. They play a significant role in the development and growth of various economies, as a result of which they are aptly referred to as the engine for growth and catalyst for socio-economic transformation of any country. SMEs are seen as catalysts in economic development and plays a major role in employment generation, rural development, and national income growth and even produces for exports to attract foreign exchange (Eze & Nwogo, 2019). According to a survey conducted by the National Bureau of statistic and Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), MSMEs in Nigeria account for 48 percent of our GDP, constituting about 96 percent of registered businesses and employ about 84 percent of the labour force (SMEDAN, 2021). This is so because government alone can no longer create enough jobs which will absorb these graduates and successfully keep them away from all forms of social vices associated with unemployment.

Sustainability of SMEs entails production of quality business graduates that possess saleable skills as problem solving skills needed for productivity, to achieve economic growth and development. More so, ensure entrepreneurship survival and of SMEs in particular, there is need to inculcate in our youths problem solving skills, an aspect of entrepreneurial skills that aids the growth of the Nigerian economy

Unfortunately, graduates of business education still battle with the issue of unemployment and sudden collapse of their businesses. The skill of problem identification and problem solving seems to be non-existent among the graduates, who seems not be taking advantage of opportunities around them and turning them into income generation to sustain their businesses. Kanu (2015) revealed SMEs experience minimal growth rate and that some have closed down in the first five years of operation. This trend creates doubts as to whether the business graduates possess problem solving skills required when relating with their immediate environment, which is required of them to be successfully engaged in entrepreneurship and for sustainability of their businesses. The problem of this study therefore is that, the extent business education graduates in Imo State need problem solving skills seems not clear. This paper therefore aimed at ascertaining the problem solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo state.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the human capital theory propounded by Theodor Schultz in early 1961. Schultz (1961) states that as the global economy shifts towards more knowledge based sectors, skills and human capital development becomes a central issue for policy makers and practitioners engaged in economic development, both at the national and regional levels. According to Schultz (1961), a more educated/skilled workforce makes it

easier for a firm to adopt and implement new technologies, thus reinforcing returns on education and training. Theory of human capital views schooling and training as investment in skills and competencies. This theory is related to this study in that it emphasizes the need for business education graduates to acquire problem solving skills to be able to identify and solve economic problems within their immediate environment.

Purpose of the study

The study ascertained managers' ratings of problem solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of Small and Medium Enterprises in Imo State.

Research Question

One research question guided the study:

What are the SME managers' ratings of problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance

1. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers on problem solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo state based on their years of experience (Below 5years, 5-10years, Above 10years)
2. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding problem solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo state

Review of Literature

Problem-solving Skills Needed for Sustainability

Problem solving is ability to define a problem, generate alternatives, evaluate and select the alternatives and implement solutions to them. According to Imeokparia&Ediagbonya (2019), it is a set of activities designed to analyze a situation systematically and generate, implement, and evaluate solutions. Problem-solving skills in the workplace context refers to the ability to identify the problem, apply problem-solving, formulation and solutions (Zaharim 2010).

Harris and Rogers reported that problem solving skills are the second highest ranked soft skills that business education students needed for successful post-secondary level, as these skills were integral to career development. Mason, Williams, and Cranmer (2009) corroborated that problem solving skills represented one of the generic skills that enhance

graduates' employability, and further noted that this perspective was a growing trend in higher education.

Furthermore, problem-solving skill is the process of seeking best answer to an unknown subject. Entrepreneurs face several problems while managing their small or medium scale businesses. However, the ability to develop solution within a short time is an extraordinary skill. Therefore, creative and problem-solving skills are considered as the most important key to the growth of business. Also, entrepreneurs were described as a problem solver who seeks to resolve either economy or personal difficulties with the right styles.

Problem solving skills are demonstrated in the comprehensive process of identifying a problem, generating and implementing solutions, and the assessment of the results (Arensdorf, 2009). In support of Arensdorf, Bujham- Maragh, (2010) agreed that students and employers consider problem solving skills as important entrepreneurial skills. Harris and Rogers (2008) purported that problem solving and other soft skills should begin at an early age and encouraged at postsecondary level.

Harris and Rogers (2008) reiterated that problem solving is all about using logic, as well as imagination, to make sense of a situation and come up with an intelligent solution. In fact, the best problem solvers actively anticipate potential future problems and act to prevent them or to mitigate their effects. Problem-solving abilities are related to a number of other skills, including:

analytical skills, innovative and creative thinking, a lateral mindset, adaptability and flexibility. Others are level-headedness, initiative, resilience - in order to reassess when ones first idea doesn't work, team working and Influencing skills which is the ability to get ones colleagues, clients and bosses adopt to solutions formulated.

Method

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The study was carried out in Imo State. The population of the study comprised 130 SMEs registered with the Imo State chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2019. The entire population of 130 registered SMEs was used for the study since the size is considered manageable. Data for this study was collected using a structured questionnaire. The instrument is titled "Questionnaire on Problem Solving Skills Needed for Sustainability" (QPSSNS) which has two sections, A and B. Section A contains information on the personal data of the respondents relative to years of experience (below 5years, 5-10years, above 10years). Section B contains 10 items on human relation skills. The instrument is structured on a 5 point scale of; Very Highly Needed (VHN); Highly Needed (HN); Moderately Needed (MN); Slightly Needed (SI); Not Needed (NN) with values of 5,4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. The instrument was face validated by two experts. The reliability of the instrument was determined by administering the instrument to 40 registered SMEs in Abia State which was not part of the study. Cronbach Alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument which yielded a reliability coefficient value of 0.81 which was considered high enough to judge

that the instrument is reliable. Arithmetic mean was used to analyze data related to the one research question posed and standard deviation was used to determine the homogeneity or otherwise of the respondents' ratings. The t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses. The mean ratings were interpreted using the real limit of numbers of: Very Highly Needed (VHN) 4.50 – 5.00; Highly Needed (HN) 4.50 – 4.49; Moderately Needed (MN) 2.50 – 3.49; Slightly Needed (SN) 1.50 – 2.49; Not Needed (NN) 0.50 – 1.49. Needed 1.50 – 2.49; Not Needed 1.00 – 1.49.

Results

Research Question 1

What are the SME managers' ratings of problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability in Imo State?

Table 1: Respondents' Mean and Standard Deviation Ratings of problem-solving Skills Needed by Business Education Graduates for Sustainability of SMEs

S/N	ITEM STATEMENTS	X	SD	Remarks
1	Recognize and identify problems	4.18	0.77	Highly needed
2	Identify reasons for discrepancies in products	4.12	0.79	Highly needed
3	Develop critical thinking to turn problems into opportunities	4.25	0.81	Highly needed
4	Thoroughly understand the line of business involved	3.22	0.76	Moderately needed
5	Ability to team up with experts in solving business problems	4.11	0.83	Highly needed
6	Approach every problem with the belief that it has a solution	4.32	0.65	Highly needed
7	Implement plan of action to resolve problem	3.66	0.62	Highly needed
8	Carefully analyze data collected to enhance the sustainability	4.43	0.70	Highly needed
9	Tackle identified problems headlong	3.63	0.51	Highly needed
10	Monitor and evaluate business progress	4.32	0.48	Highly needed
Cluster Mean		4.02		Highly needed

Table 1 shows that out of 10 items rated by managers on the problem solving skills, 9 were highly needed and 1 was moderately needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State. The cluster mean of 4.02 confirms that problem-solving skills are highly needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers on problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs based on their years of experience (Below 5years, 5-10years, Above 10years).

Table 1: ANOVA analysis of the significant difference among SME managers on problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs based on their years of experience (Below 5years, 5-10years, Above 10years)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	469.449	2	234.725	21.094	.00
Within Groups	1413.174	127	11.127		
Total	1882.623	129			

Data in Table 9 show the significant difference among SME managers on problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs based on their years of experience. The result of the analysis revealed that p -value (0.00) is less than the alpha level = 0.05, $p(0.00) < 0.05$. This result therefore indicates that there was a significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers on problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs based on their years of experience. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas on problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs.

Table 2: t-test analysis of the significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs

Variables	N	\bar{X}	SD	df	t-value	p-value	Remark
Urban	100	33.52	3.79	128	0.01	0.05	Significant
Rural	30	31.50	3.54				

Data presented in Table 10 show the significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs. The result shows a t-value of 0.01 with 128 degree of freedom and p-value of 0.05. Since the t-value of 0.01 is less than the α -value of 0.05 ($0.01 < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a

significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding problem-solving skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs.

Discussions of Findings

The findings from this study revealed that the problem-solving skills that are needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs include recognizing and clarifying problems, identifying reasons for discrepancies in products, developing critical thinking to turn problems into opportunities, ability to team up with experts in solving business problems, approaching every problem with the belief that it has a solution, implementing plan of action to resolve problem, carefully analyze data collected to enhance sustainability, tackling identified problem headlong and monitoring and evaluating progress. This finding is in line with that of Oduma (2010) which discovered that employers of labour desire business education graduates to possess problem-solving skills as a pre-requisite for gainful employment in establishment and organizations. The findings also confirm Mason, Williams, and Cranmer (2009) assertions that problem solving skills represented one of the generic skills that enhance graduates' employability, and a growing trend in higher education. This also supported Imeokparia and Edigbonya (2012) findings that possession of problem-solving skills among business education graduates were considered high for successful performances and sustainability of businesses.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that premature deaths of SMEs in Nigeria results from the dire need for possession of problem solving skills among graduates of business education for business sustainability. These skills include recognizing and clarifying problems, identifying reasons for discrepancies in products, developing critical thinking to turn problems into opportunities, ability to team up with experts in solving business problems, approaching every problem with the belief that it has a solution and implementing plan of action to resolve problems in business. Others are carefully analyzing of data collected to enhance success, tackling identified problem headlong, monitoring and evaluating progress in business for sustainability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended among others that;

1. Institutions of higher learning should constantly organize workshops, seminars, and conferences for business educators for them to gain more knowledge on problem solving skills which will help them to teach and impart business knowledge to their students. This will in turn help the students manage businesses, to achieve success and sustainability of SMEs owned by them.

2. Business education undergraduates should practice during training using businesses established by institutions operating within the school environment. This enables them to gain firsthand knowledge and experience on problem solving skills and subsequently help them identify and solve problems when they engage in business activities of their own.

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