Career Readiness Trends Among Final-Year Undergraduates in a Public University in Ibadan, Nigeria

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Abstract

The transition from university to the professional world marks a crucial stage, and being well- prepared for one's career is essential for success. However, existing literature indicates a gap between skills obtained through tertiary education and the realities of the world of work. Hence, this research explored the potential differences in how final-year undergraduates in Ibadan perceive their preparedness for careers, examining the impact of age and gender on career readiness skills. Employing a descriptive cross-sectional design, the study involved a sample of 320 final-year students from a public University in Ibadan, randomly selected to respond to a 35- item questionnaire. The results revealed that male students exhibited a higher degree of career readiness compared to their female counterparts. Furthermore, the study showed that age did not significantly affect career readiness. Conversely, students rated themselves highly in teamwork, professionalism, and critical thinking skills, moderately in leadership, digital technology, and communication skills, while scoring lower in global and cultural fluency as well as career management skills. These findings underscore the need for enhanced career programmes and guidance within tertiary institutions across Nigeria. Moreover, the study can offer valuable insights to policymakers for crafting strategies aimed at bolstering students' readiness for their future careers.

Keywords: Career readiness competences, Age, Gender differences, Undergraduates

The transition from university education to the professional world is a critical phase in the lives of undergraduate students. As they approach the culmination of their academic journey, final- year undergraduates are expected to possess a set of career readiness competencies that will enable them to seamlessly integrate into the workforce. The concept of career readiness describes the process by which individuals are equipped to seek, obtain, maintain, and advance in a job or career (Hooker & Brand, 2013). It refers to the degree to which individuals demonstrate essential core competencies necessary for success in the workplace and effective life-long career management (Stebleton et al., 2020). Career readiness encompasses a range of skills, including communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability, which are vital for success in today's dynamic and competitive job market. Marciniak et al. (2022) defined career readiness as the attainment of maturity in comprehensive career decision-making, involving processes like career planning, exploration, and decision-making. It signifies an individual's preparedness for employment and establishment in their chosen career path (Mansoor & Tan, 2009). Studies suggest that career readiness is closely linked to career maturity, indicating individuals who have progressed through planning and exploration stages, achieving stability and growth in their chosen careers (Dodd et al., 2022; Marciniak et al., 2022)

Furthermore, career readiness comprises several characteristics or skill sets that individuals are expected to possess (Hendricson et al., 2006; Koyuncuolğlu, 2022; Layton et al., 2020). The National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE] (2021) outlined the following skill sets as indicators of career readiness, including career management, communication, critical thinking/problem-solving, digital technology, global and cultural fluency, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, and team collaboration (Camara, 2013; Stebleton et al., 2020). According to Vaughan (2010), career management is depicted as reliant on three essential competencies crucial for navigating life, education, and work effectively. These competencies— self-information, exploration of opportunities, and decision-making and action—are highlighted as integral components of effective career management. Self-information entails understanding oneself to facilitate effective self-management and interpersonal relationships. Exploration of opportunities involves identifying and capitalizing on learning and work opportunities. Decision-making and action involve planning career paths, adjusting plans as needed, adapting to change, and responding appropriately to circumstances (Nasir & Zaki, 2021; Vaughan, 2010). Career management as a framework comprises core

competencies such as awareness of a career, exploring career options, and career preparation. It entails a series of activities aimed at self- exploration, self-awareness, exploring job opportunities, evaluating work environments, setting career goals, and devising strategies to achieve them (Callanan et al., 2017; Layton et al., 2020).

The second dynamic skill in career readiness is communication, which is indispensable in the professional realm. It encompasses interactions, collaborations, relationships, and team leadership, all of which hinge on effective communication. Consequently, communication stands as a highly prized skill for career readiness (Çakır, 2021). It denotes the capability to convey information in a manner that fosters mutual understanding among all parties involved. Communication skills encompass both written and oral forms, comprising speaking, writing, reading, and listening (Azhar, et al., 2020). NACE (2021) reported that while various aspects of oral communication skills remain valuable in the dynamic labour market, the current shift towards trends such as social distancing, remote work, and increased virtual communication in place of face-to-face interactions necessitates heightened competence in written communication. According to NACE, communication competence is evident in individuals who exhibit satisfactory levels of public speaking, they can clearly and effectively convey thoughts and ideas within and beyond their organization, demonstrate clear self-expression, and possess the ability to write or edit professional documents. NACE (2021) further delineates communication competence into two categories: eloquence and technical proficiency. Eloquence in communication suggests that career-ready individuals can articulate their thoughts and ideas effectively and clearly to ensure understanding by others, while technical communication competence pertains to the ability to express ideas systematically based on the communication channel being utilized, such as technical reports or working documents. Furthermore, critical thinking and problem-solving, the third competency are pivotal indicators of career readiness. This involves the intellectual abilities of ideation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information gleaned from personal experiences, observations, or interactions (Rodzalan & Saat, 2015; Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Reports assert that critical thinking skills are highly sought after in various work environments, representing high-level reasoning that necessitates active and skillful engagement, ultimately leading to effective problem-solving (Rodzalan & Saat, 2015). Snyder and Snyder (2008) underscored the significance of this competence, labelling it as “the process of thinking about thinking” (p.90) and asserting its role in enabling individuals to adeptly address challenges in social interactions, science, and practical scenarios. Critical thinking and problem-solving are intertwined concepts, with the achievement of one indicating the presence of the other, given that problem-solving inherently demands extensive critical thinking (Hendricson et al., 2006). Belecina & Ocampo (2018) defined a critical thinker as one who can pose questions, conceptualize problems, scrutinize evidence, analyze assumptions and biases, consider various perspectives, employ logical rather than emotional reasoning, and navigate ambiguity adeptly.

The fourth career competency has been highlighted as digital technology. In the era of Industrial Revolution 4.0, characterized by digitalization, digital transformation, and a significant reliance on technology across various industries, there is a pressing need for the development of competencies in digital technology (Mutohhari et al., 2021). The landscape of work in this era has shifted towards the widespread adoption of diverse technologies and digital methods to enhance efficiency and productivity. Consequently, the term “smart work” has become commonplace, denoting the utilization of various resources, including technology, to work effectively and efficiently (Hooley & Staunton, 2020). Considering this career trend of technological advancement and the profound influence of digitalization on today’s workforce, coupled with the rapidly evolving nature of digitalization, graduates must equip themselves with the essential competence in digital technology. In essence, a graduate who demonstrates readiness to enter the workforce in their chosen career can comprehend and ethically leverage technologies to enhance job efficiency and accomplish assigned tasks and goals (Hooley & Staunton, 2020; NACE, 2020; Olofsson et al., 2020). NACE (2020) further delineates six behavioural indicators of career readiness concerning competence in digital technology. Firstly, individuals must demonstrate the ability to navigate change and remain open to learning or updating their knowledge of technology, requiring commitment, effort, and perseverance to achieve skill competence (Koyuncuoğlu, 2022). Secondly, individuals should be capable of utilizing technology to efficiently and effectively accomplish job tasks. Another behavioural indicator of digital technology competence, as stated by NACE (2020), is the ability to identify the most suitable digital resources for specific tasks. A career-ready individual with digital

competencies should also exhibit the skill of creatively managing technology to integrate data, supporting appropriate, effective, and timely decision-making (Mutohhari et al., 2021). Additionally, individuals should demonstrate quick adaptability to new technologies or those with which they are unfamiliar. Also, a career-ready individual should demonstrate the ability to utilize information, generate meaningful ideas, and leverage available technological resources to achieve strategic goals (Koyuncuoğlu, 2022; Mutohhari et al., 2021).

The fifth career readiness competence, global and cultural fluency, involves an individual's ability to respect and interact effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions. This proficiency is demonstrated through openness, inclusivity, sensitivity, and the capability to interact respectfully with individuals while recognizing and appreciating their differences (NACE, 2020). Such individuals also exhibit open, sensitive, flexible communication, and active listening as they interact with others around them. The aforementioned qualities empower them to work efficiently and effectively thereby yielding tangible results. According to the World Economic Forum (2017), it placed strong emphasis on the significance of global competence in adequately equipping present and future employees for the evolving landscape of work. The report recommended the integration of global competence into educational curricula. Likewise, a study conducted by Deloitte and the Global Business Coalition for Education (2018) highlighted that cultural fluency stands as a crucial employability skill for success in the future workplace. Similarly, leadership, the sixth career readiness competency, involves the action or skill of influencing a group of individuals within the same social circle to achieve specified goals and objectives. It entails the ability to harness the strengths of others to accomplish common goals. The responsibilities of a leader include: organizing and managing projects, training team members, and overseeing `activities until goals are accomplished.

The individual should be adept at assessing both personal and others' emotions, using empathic skills to guide and motivate; coaching and developing others, and organizing, prioritizing, and delegating work (NACE, 2020). A leader exhibits traits such as discipline, self- confidence, commitment, resilience, emotional intelligence, effective communication, and management skills. Diverse leadership approaches encompass the autocratic style, emphasizing efficiency; the transactional style, where incentives drive goal achievement; the transformational style, centred on attaining established objectives; the democratic style, engaging team members in goal-setting and attainment; and the coercive style, where leaders insist on immediate compliance with established rules governing organizational goals and objectives. Villarreal et al. (2018) further posited that leadership and its diverse styles have the capability of influencing career readiness among youths, equipping them with the necessary skills for the workplace. Northhouse (2010) analyzed that transformational leadership elicits changes in individuals by integrating charismatic and visionary leadership, enabling adolescents to evolve into better versions of themselves which is essential for career readiness. A study by Career Builder (2014) stated that new graduates often lack some skills essential for a successful career, including leadership skills. According to Tapp (2021), leadership skills can impact various aspects of an organization and establish the relationship between the organization and employee performance. Notably, 65% of employers rated leadership qualities as an indispensable skill in job seekers (NACE, 2022).

The seventh career readiness competency is work ethics. It encompasses a set of principles and guidelines an individual sets for themselves, serving as a framework for day-to-day activities within the organization. These principles include aspects such as time management, self- motivation, loyalty, discipline, accountability, and hard work, among others. Work ethic is described as a set of values associated with a person's character, often developed through family relationships and formal education, shaping and influencing an individual's actions and beliefs (Chaşovschi, 2016). Huang and Cappelli (2007) underscored the importance of work ethic for workplace productivity noting that individuals with a higher level of work ethic tend to be generally productive. In addition, Miller et al. (2002) stated that the term "work ethic" is not a singular concept but a combination of attitudes and beliefs regarding work behaviour. Seven dimensions of work ethics were identified which include: the centrality of work- individuals perceive work as a crucial aspect of their lives, even if they had all they wanted and didn't need to work; self-reliance which emphasizes the ability to handle work independently for a successful work experience; hard work, which implies acknowledging that success in the workplace will not be achieved except by hard work and perseverance; leisure, which highlights the need for employees to maintain a balanced life by taking time to relax and enjoy

life away from work pressures - this helps to maintain a healthy work-to-life ratio; morality / ethics, stating fairness and justice in dealings with others; delayed gratification, stressing the need for hard work over time to achieve career success; and wasted time, understanding that time should not be wasted at any point (Woehr et al., 2007).

Professionalism, part of work ethics, was described by Friedson (2001) as the ability of staff members within an organization to manage their responsibilities independently, rather than being solely directed by managers. This concept encompasses proficiency in time management, communication, and accountability, skills that can be acquired and honed through practical experiences such as internships and practicums before entering the workforce. Rollag (2015) statedthat a significant number of employees lack professionalism skills crucial for success in their respective fields and businesses. Specifically, they often lack training in areas such as social networking, proactivity, and self-presentation. Robles (2012) further emphasized the importance of soft skills such as communication, professionalism, teamwork, and work ethic in both employment and entrepreneurial settings. As a considerable portion of the upcoming generation transitions into the workforce, there should be increased emphasis on fostering the development of these soft skills (Tulgan, 2016). Finally, teamwork collaboration the last career readiness competence, involves the collective effort of individuals towards the accomplishment of a common goal. Each member of the team is assigned specific duties and responsibilities geared towards achieving a common goal (Mathieu et al., 2017). It is a crucial skill necessary for collaborating with others to bring about positive change (Brungardt, 2011). Collaboration, on the other hand, involves diverse individuals coming together to address a specific problem. It entails the ability to effectively interact with various teams, establish relationships, negotiate, and manage conflicts. According to Care et al. (2018), collaboration arises when achieving a goal requires more than one person's capabilities alone, necessitating the pooling of resources with others. Key collaboration skills include effective communication, emotional intelligence, and respect for diversity. Teamwork /collaboration demands individual efforts towards the achievement of common objectives. Engaging in volunteering and sports activities has been noted to enhance teamwork skills (Howell, 2013; Profiroiu & Pacesila, 2017), which are essential for success in both professional and personal life in the 21st century. The ability to work collaboratively with colleagues and individuals from various backgrounds, including various cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints, is a critical aspect of teamwork/collaboration skills. Individuals possessing this skill can function effectively within a team structure and adeptly handle conflict situations (NACE, 2020).

Additionally, studies have explored career readiness within the context of tertiary education, asserting that this sort of preparedness for the world of work is a milestone that is expected to be achieved during this phase of self-discovery (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Idiaka & Uzoechi, 2016; Shulman et al., 2009). Recent career trends among undergraduates have shown a great emphasis on acquiring training in preparation for adult work roles (Adegbite & Govender, 2021; Arnett, 2007). This trend is driven by significant changes in the labour market, which now demands diverse competencies, innovative products, services, and the ability to maintain competitiveness and remain relevant (Carnevale, 2013; Idiaka & Uzoechi, 2016; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015). Consequently, it is anticipated that the career explorations typical of undergraduates, and enhanced by the knowledge, skills, and experiences achieved through tertiary education, will eventually lead to self-discovery and the establishment of more stable and permanent career goals and decisions. However, studies conducted in Nigeria becry the wide gap between skills obtained through tertiary education and the realities of the world of work (Ajao et al., 2022; Ezechukwu et al., 2021; Ukamaka et al., 2021), although it is anticipated that tertiary education should provide the necessary knowledge, experiences, skills, competencies, and training to equip final-year undergraduates towards a smooth transition into the world of work, fully prepared to make advancements in their chosen career paths. However, trends among undergraduates in Nigeria have indicated otherwise as studies have revealed that final-year students encounter unexpected difficulties in their transition from tertiary education to work life due to skills deficit (Ezechukwu et al., 2021; Koyenikan & Anozie, 2020).

Some researchers have blamed the curriculum, asserting that the outdated state of the Nigerian tertiary education curricula is failing to meet the needs of today's labour market (Ajao et al., 2022; Ezechukwu et al., 2021). Some others opine that there is a mismatch between students' preferred career aspirations and what they end up studying due to the complex challenges of securing admission into tertiary institutions (Ezechukwu et al., 2021; Ukamaka et al., 2021). Koyenikan and Anozie (2020), mentioned that the competencies employers

in the Nigerian labour market emphasize for graduates to possess are beyond academic skills, and these competencies are just as valued as the academic certificate obtained. A combination of these competencies and certification according to Koyenikan and Anozie (2020), is what determines career readiness.

The aim of the current study therefore is to highlight the existing trend in career readiness among final-year undergraduates in a public university in Ibadan. Previous findings suggest that varied life experiences, exposure to diverse educational resources, and expectations, are key factors that could shape career readiness among undergraduates (Dodd et al., 2022; Ibok, 2013; Idiaka & Uzoechi, 2016). For instance, Idiaka and Uzoechi (2016) asserted that older students from the ages of 24 years and above, show higher levels of proficiency in employability skills than younger students due to more exposure to life's experiences. Some other studies suggest that there is no direct impact of age on the career competencies of undergraduates (Ferraro et al., 2018; Migunde et al., 2015). Meanwhile, some studies indicate that the level of impact of age on career readiness is determined by the perspective from which age is considered, be it chronological or functional (De Lange et al., 2021; Ng & Feldman, 2010). Additionally, studies suggest that gender roles and societal expectations contribute to variations in how male and female undergraduates perceive and prioritize certain competencies relevant to their chosen career paths (Ananthram et al., 2024; Uzoechi, 2015). Contrary to these findings, some other studies indicate no observable disparity in career readiness between male and female undergraduates (Dodd et al., 2022; Oyewole, 2023). Generally, there is a lack of consensus as to the contributions of these demographic factors on career readiness among undergraduates.

Moreover, the importance of career readiness competencies for achieving success in the labour market has been highlighted. However, a key concern of career readiness in the Nigerian context is the troubling gap between the anticipated preparedness of graduates entering the workforce each year and the realities they encounter. Existing literature indicates that graduates often lack the necessary skills to meet the demands of the workplace (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Sule et al. (2020) further emphasized this issue by highlighting the deficiency of essential employability skills, such as proficiency in digital technology, teamwork, and critical thinking, among Nigerian students, potentially hindering their prospects for employment. This study is therefore focused on investigating specific trends in career readiness among final-year undergraduates in Ibadan with the expectation that these trends will provide insight into students' perceptions of career readiness, patterns of strengths and deficiencies in career readiness competencies as well as the contribution of students' demographics towards their perception of career readiness. It is believed that such insights will allow for the development of effective, practicable, and sustainable career programmes and trainings that will foster career readiness among students in Nigerian Universities.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised and answered:

1. How confident are final-year undergraduates about their readiness for their careers?
2. What is the extent of career readiness among final-year undergraduates?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in career readiness among male and female final-year undergraduates.
2. There is no significant influence of age on the career readiness of final-year undergraduates.

Method

Design

The study utilized a descriptive cross-sectional design. It is a study in which the researcher is primarily interested in describing relationships among variables without seeking to establish a causal connection. The rationale for this research design is that the study variable occurred before the commencement of the study.

Population and Participants

The population for this study comprised final-year undergraduates in a public University in Ibadan, Nigeria. The Student Affairs Division of the University provided a sample frame of final- year undergraduates across 10 faculties, from this sample frame, a simple random sampling technique was used to select 320 final-year undergraduates which made up the sample for this study. The age range of participants was delineated as follows: 21-24 years (179), 25-28 years (110), and 29 years and above (25).

Measure

Career Readiness Scale (Miller, 2019)

The instrument contained 35 items which measured eight distinct dimensions of career readiness including career management, communication, critical thinking/problem-solving, digital technology, global and cultural fluency, leadership, professionalism/work ethics, and teamwork collaboration. The questionnaire also included two (2) items which measured students' level of confidence in their preparedness towards their careers. The Career Readiness Scale was made up of structured questions measuring each facet of career readiness in a 5-point Likert scale format including - No experience, basic proficiency, limited proficiency, intermediate proficiency, and high proficiency. The career management facet, however, was measured on a 4-point Likert format ranging from "No experience, basic proficiency, limited proficiency, and intermediate proficiency." Some items contained in the questionnaire include: "I can research and explore job options," "I am able to articulate my thoughts clearly," "I have attended a diversity/inclusive training", "I am able to arrive at a meeting/work on time and prepared" etc. For this study, the reliability of this scale was determined using the Cronbach alpha coefficient. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for each of the eight dimensions of the career readiness scale are as follows: career management (α= .79); communication (α= .84); critical thinking/ problem-solving (α= .90); digital technology (α= .86); global and cultural fluency (α= .77); leadership (α= .87); professionalism/work ethics (α= .91); and team collaboration (α= .92).

Procedure of Administration

The researchers used the platform of a career day programme organized by the University for final-year undergraduates as an avenue for data collection. The questionnaire was administered to the students from the 10 faculties selected who attended the programme. The researchers obtained consent from the students for their participation in the study, assuring them of the privacy and confidentiality of any information shared, participants were further assured that their data would be strictly used for research purposes. Those students who agreed to participate were provided with the questionnaire. Additionally, the researchers guided the students through the questionnaire, addressing any areas of confusion or misunderstanding. The questionnaires were distributed and collected shortly before the commencement of the career day programme.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the research questions raised in this study. Independent t-test was used to analyze gender differences in career readiness among final-year undergraduates, while a one-way analysis of variance was used to establish the influence of age on student's career readiness.

Results

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Categories	N (%)
Age	under 21 years	6 (1.9%)
	21-24 years	179 (55.9%)
	25-28 years	110 (34.4%)
	over 29 years	25 (7.8%)
Gender	Male	119 (37.2%)
	Female	201 (62.8%)

In Table 1, displays the statistics of the demographic characteristics of respondents. Respondents within the age bracket of 21 – 24 were mostly represented, 179 (55.9%) and followed by the age bracket of 25 – 28, 110 (34.4%). There were more female (62.8%) than male (37.2%) respondents for the study. Moreover, the study ensured that all faculties were represented.

Figure 1 displays the spread of respondents for the study. Education had the highest response rate (73), followed by Science, (36); Social Science, (31); Arts, (27); Public Health, (26), etc. To obtain the difference in males and females concerning career readiness, the study estimated the independent T-Test.

Figure 1

Respondents Based on Faculties

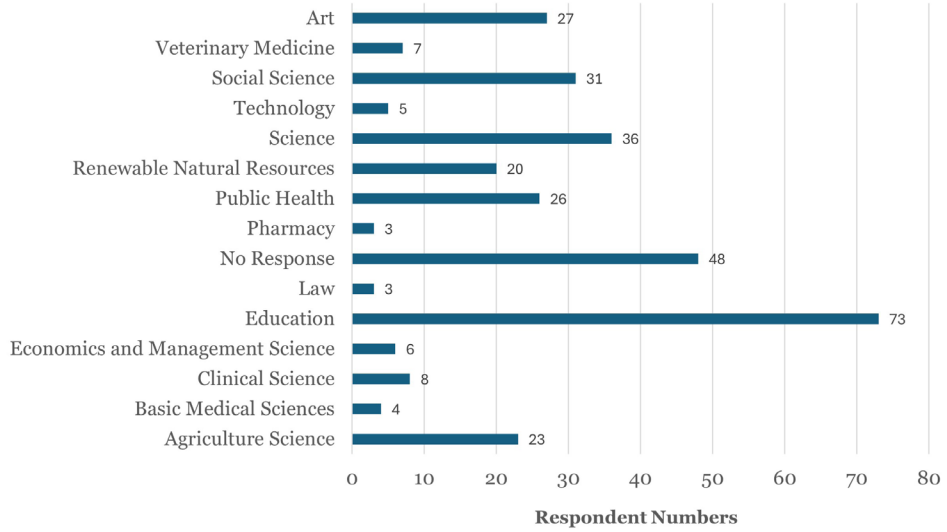


Table 2

Independent Samples t-test for Student's Career Readiness by Gender

Career Readiness	N	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*
Male	119	30.19	5.39	2.857*	318
Female	201	28.37	5.69		

Note: *significant at the <.01 level.

In Table 2, male students (M =30.19, SD =5.39) showed stronger readiness to attain career goals in university education than female students (M =28.37, SD =5.69). Although the mean difference of 1.823 can be considered a small difference. The null hypothesis was still rejected. Again, the researcher estimated Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to obtain the students' career readiness in relation to the age of the respondents.

Age of Respondents and Students' Career Readiness

The study examined career readiness competence based on the age of respondents. The ANOVA analysis and descriptive statistics are provided in Tables 3a and 3b.

In Table 3a, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistics was performed on the effect of age and career readiness among respondents. We found no age (category) effect on career readiness on respondents, F (3,316) = 0.65,

p= .583. This means that the null hypothesis was accepted. Table 3b further revealed the breakdown of students' career readiness by age group. Under 21 years (*M*=30.56); 21-24 years (*M*= 28.69); 25-28 years (*M*= 29.50); and Over 29 years (*M*= 29.37), which attest to insignificant career readiness differences among the age group.

Table 3a

One-Way Analysis of Variance of Career Readiness by Students' Age Group

Source	*df*	SS	MS	*F*	Sig
Between groups	3	61.99	20.66	.65	.583
Within groups	316	10041.93	31.78		
Total	319	10103.92			

Table 3b

Descriptive Statistics of Career Readiness by Students' Age-Group

Age of resp.	*N*	Mean	Std. Deviation
Under 21 years	6	30.56	7.49
21-24 years	179	28.69	5.49
25-28 years	110	29.50	5.64
Over 29 years	25	29.37	6.22
Total	320	29.06	5.63

In Table 4, we obtained the level of confidence to be successful among respondents' chosen careers, 27 respondents (8.4%) indicated that their academic field had not prepared them for success in their chosen career, 154 (48.1%) were somewhat confident/prepared, and 139 (43.4%) were strongly confident/ prepared for their chosen career. The second question sought to investigate how confident experiences outside the classroom had prepared the respondents for the world of work; 21 (6.6%) were unprepared, 131 (40.9%) were somewhat prepared, 162 (50.6%) were strongly prepared while 6 (1.9%) did not engage in any activity outside of the classroom to boost success in their chosen career field.

Table 4

Confidence Level of Emerging Adults Towards Career Readiness

Question	Confidence level	Number of respondents (%)
How confident do you feel that your academic field of study has prepared you to be succeessful in your chosen career?	I am unprepared	27 (8.4%)
	I am somewhat prepared	154 (48.1%)
	I am strongly prepared	139 (43.4%)
How confident do you feel that your activities outside of the classroom have prepared you for you to be successful in your chosen career or field?	I am unprepared	21 (6.6%)
	I am somewhat prepared	131 (40.9%)
	I am strongly prepared	162 (50.6%)
	Did not use	6 (1.9%)

Dimensions of Career Readiness Competencies

Table 5 depicts the skill set of students. These competencies (proficiency) are reflective of accumulated experiences and education training. Many respondents rated their proficiency high in teamwork collaboration (*M*=4.17; *SD* = .92), Professionalism (*M*=4.07; *SD* = .85), and critical thinking (*M*=3. 81; *SD* = .90). Skills such as digital technology (*M* = 3.65; *SD* = 1.01); Communication (*M* = 3.65; *SD* = .96) and leadership (M = 3.72; *SD*=1.12) were rated moderately However, some respondents rated themselves low in career management (*M*=2.62; *SD* = .73), Global and Cultural Fluency (*M* = 3.34; *SD* = .80). Figure 2 below displays trend analysis of skill set (proficiency) among respondents.

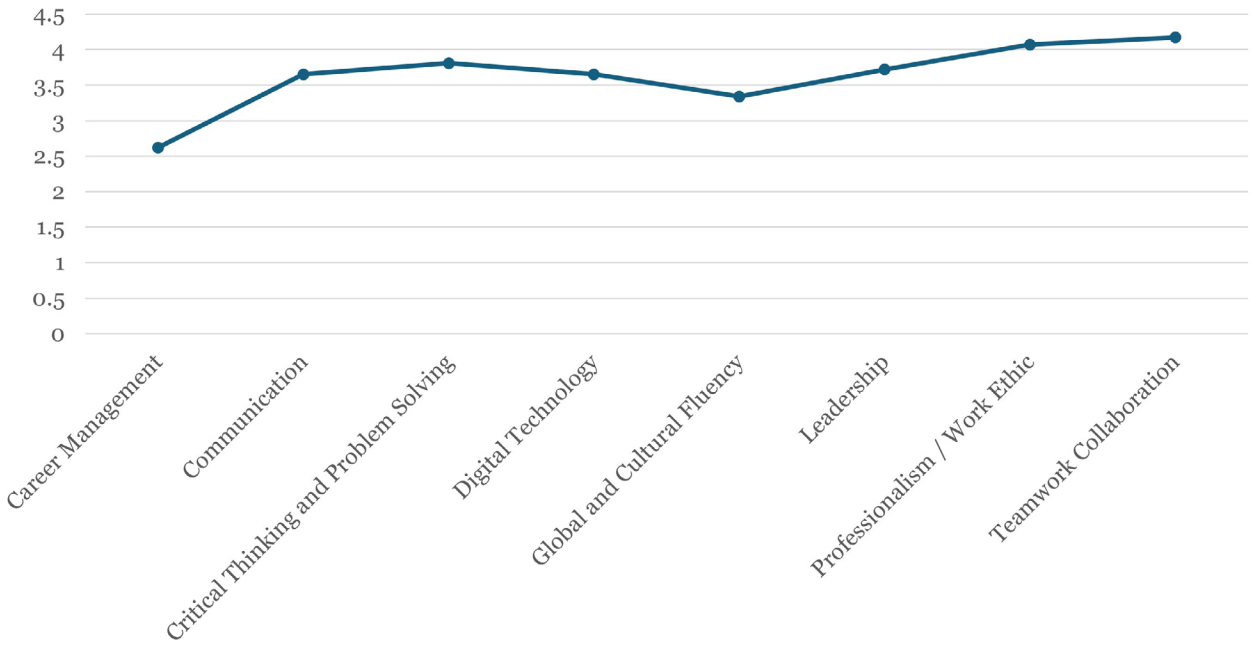
Table 5

Descriptive Statistics of Career Readiness Competency Sub-Scale Scores

Subscale	Mean	*SD*
Career management	2.62	.73
Communication	3.65	.96
Critical thinking/problem solving	3.81	.90
Digital technology	3.65	1.01
Global and cultural fluency	3.34	.80
Leadership	3.72	1.12
Professionalism/ work ethic	4.07	.85
Teamwork collaboration	4.17	.92

Figure 2

Career Readiness Competency



Discussion

The research explored final-year undergraduates' confidence in their readiness for their chosen career path and whether their educational experiences sufficiently primed them for the workforce. According to the results, merely 43% of the final-year undergraduates expressed strong confidence in their academic training adequately preparing them for professional life, indicating a prevailing lack of assurance among the majority. This finding echoes previous studies such as McGraw-Hill (2018), which similarly revealed that less than half of students felt adequately prepared for their future careers. Furthermore, Casner-Lotto et al. (2009) noted that numerous employers had to provide additional training to recent graduates to assist them in adapting to workplace demands, emphasizing the disparity between academic readiness and real-world requirements.

Likewise, the study investigated whether involvement in activities outside of the classroom enhanced final-year students' readiness for their careers, with 50.6% indicating that such engagements did contribute to their career readiness. Interestingly, contrary to prior research, Andrew et al. (2015) discovered that work experience before and during studies (excluding internships) did not significantly influence students' perception of their readiness for employment. This variance might be attributed to the fact that most students acquired work experience through non-academic endeavours rather than study-related opportunities (Werquin, 2012). Overall, the findings suggest that a majority of students lack confidence in their readiness to enter the workforce, highlighting a potential disparity between academic training and the practical skills

required in professional environments. The curriculum should address these gaps by offering experiential learning opportunities.

Moreover, employers have long emphasized the importance of specific skill sets required in the professional realm. As outlined by Ritter et al. (2018), soft skills like critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and leadership, among others, are indispensable in contemporary workplaces. Hence, it is vital to explore how respondents evaluated themselves across the eight dimensions of the career readiness scale and assess their perceived proficiency in these skills. From the study's findings, many respondents rated themselves highly in teamwork, professionalism, and critical thinking. They expressed possessing a significant level of teamwork skills vital for transitioning into the workforce, feeling confident in their ability to collaborate with others to achieve common objectives. This observation aligns with De Prada et al. (2022), which underscored the importance of teamwork skills in students' preparedness for employment. Abas and Imam (2016) also stressed that graduates with robust teamwork skills held a competitive edge.

Furthermore, respondents assessed themselves highly in professionalism and critical thinking skills. Professionalism is crucial as it enables recent graduates to adapt to their roles independently. This observation is consistent with previous research; for instance, Singh et al. (2013) reported that employers rated professionalism as one of the most critical skills required in the workplace. Black et al. (2021) developed a course focused on professionalism, including concepts, significance, relevant exercises, and end-of-semester evaluations. Results indicated that the professionalism course bolstered students' confidence in pursuing job opportunities successfully. Additionally, the participants rated themselves highly in critical thinking skills,feeling adept at problem-solving and offering solutions. This finding aligns with the findings of Yahya et al. (2011) on the critical thinking competence of final-year students.

Although students rated themselves highly in critical thinking skills, they still lagged in global and cultural fluency competence, indicating that the curriculum plays a pivotal role in equipping students with the requisite skills for the workforce. Rodzalan and Saat (2015) recommended that lecturers provide clear instructions, promote engaging activities, and offer training and camps to enhance learners' critical thinking skills. On the flip side, digital technology, communication, and leadership skills were perceived as moderate among the participants, indicating that final-year students believe they have acquired some proficiency in these areas but not enough to meet the demands of the workplace fully. This contrasts with the findings of Creo et al. (2020) and Ramisetty and Desai (2017), where students reported a high level of communication skills. To understand the skills sought by modern employers in graduate employees, Rahman et al. (2019) conducted a study revealing that employers prioritize communication skills above others. This underscores the importance of graduates possessing strong communication skills for employment and effective functioning in the workplace.

Similarly, leadership skills were identified as moderate among the participants. Final-year students did not perceive themselves as possessing or having acquired adequate leadership skills for the workplace. This suggests that participants did not believe they possessed sufficient leadership traits such as discipline, emotional intelligence, and resilience, among others. This contrasts with the results presented by Ramisetty and Desai (2017), where students demonstrated a high level of leadership skills, while Villarreal et al. (2018) emphasized leadership skills as a significant predictor of career readiness for fresh graduates to adapt to the workplace. Furthermore, concerning digital technology, students also rated themselves moderately. This aligns with Koyuncuoglu's (2022) findings, where students assessed their digital competence as moderate, suggesting a potential mismatch between the skills graduates possess and those required by various organizations. In the digital era of the 21st century, graduates must be well-versed in digital advancements to enhance workplace productivity. Strauss (2016) highlighted that 36% of employers reported a lack of digital competency among graduate employees. Regarding global and cultural fluency and career management, participants rated themselves low. The low rating on global and cultural fluency suggests that participants did not feel confident in their ability to interact and engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, genders, and religious beliefs, among others. In a country like Nigeria, with over 250 ethnic groups and diverse religions, this implies a lack of openness, inclusivity, and respectful interactions toward others from different backgrounds.

Career management, which encompasses awareness, exploration, and career preparation, was notably low among the final-year students. This indicates that students struggled to delineate their career goals, lacked

awareness of available opportunities, and did not fully utilize opportunities such as internships to prepare for success. This contrasts with an intervention study conducted by Taylor and Hooley (2014), where those who participated in the training exhibited a higher level of career management competencies upon completing their studies compared to those who did not participate in the training. Jackson and Wilton (2016) assessed business undergraduate students' career management competencies. They rated themselves low on awareness compared to decision-making, expressing competency in decision-making in career paths, which is the ability to develop and adapt career plans.

Hypothesis one aimed to examine gender differences in career readiness among final-year students. The results indicated that male students exhibit higher levels of career readiness compared to female students. These findings challenge certain perspectives in the literature. For instance, the study by Marciniak et al. (2022) suggests that females tend to demonstrate greater levels of career readiness than males, while Dodd et al. (2022) found no significant difference in career readiness between male and female students. These disparities may arise from various factors such as differences in sample populations, cultural or environmental contexts, or methodological approaches. Notably, Marciniak et al. (2022) and Dodd et al. (2022) focused on career readiness among adolescents, whereas the current study examined career readiness among final-year undergraduates. Additionally, discrepancies in findings may also be attributed to variations in environmental and cultural factors across the study locations. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Cone et al. (2021), Idiaka and Uzoechi (2016), Mansor and Tan (2009), and Parietti et al. (2016), which indicated higher levels of career readiness among males compared to females. Although this study reveals that the mean difference between male and female students' career readiness is not considerable, it is statistically significant.

Hypothesis two explored the impact of age on the career readiness of final-year students. The independent variable, age, was categorized into four main groups: under 21 years, 21-24, 25- 28, and 29 and above. The results indicated that there is no significant influence of students' age on their career readiness. This finding diverges from the perspectives of several researchers, including Adegbite and Govender (2021), Idiaka and Uzoechi (2016), and Marciniak et al. (2022), who argued that age is significantly associated with career readiness, suggesting that individuals become more prepared for their chosen careers as they grow older. However, the findings of this study differs from this perspective by suggesting that the age of final-year students does not significantly affect their career readiness. This deviation could be attributed to the possibility that individuals may acquire more exposure, information, and experience over time. These experiences may contribute to higher levels of career readiness rather than simply the change in chronological age. These findings align with that of Dodd et al. (2022) and Arnado and Posadas (2022), who argued that career guidance and experience gained from career programmes have a more substantial influence on career readiness compared to chronological age.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore career readiness among final-year undergraduates at a public University in Ibadan. Two research questions and two hypotheses were formulated to direct the investigation. The findings revealed a noteworthy contrast in career readiness between male and female students, with males exhibiting a higher level of readiness compared to females, who displayed a lower level of preparedness. Additionally, the study uncovered that age does not exert a significant influence on career readiness among students. Moreover, the participants rated themselves highly in teamwork, professionalism, and critical thinking skills, moderately in leadership, digital technology, and communication skills, but lower in global and cultural fluency skills as well as career management.

Implications for Counselling

This study reveals a significant disparity in career readiness between male and female final- year students, with male students exhibiting higher levels of preparedness compared with their female counterparts. Given the increasing advocacy efforts by both local and international organizations for the empowerment

of the girl child, these findings carry profound implications for all stakeholders. The study underscores the urgent need for enhanced career programmes and guidance at the level of tertiary education, with tailored interventions and strategies aimed at addressing the specific career needs of female students.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the necessity of integrating career guidance and counselling programmes as a mandatory component of tertiary education. Encouraging exposure to diverse career competencies before graduation holds promise for boosting career readiness among graduates. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of addressing the identified areas of weakness among students and implementing relevant solutions, such as curriculum revisions, facilitating internship opportunities, and offering skill enhancement programmes.

Recommendations

There should be an improvement in career programmes to promote initiatives that empower female students to overcome career-related challenges and bridge the gender gap in career readiness. This could include mentorship programmes, networking opportunities, and leadership development initiatives tailored to suit the specific career needs of female students. The findings of this study further draw emphasis to the need for career guidance for students in tertiary institution as, career guidance initiatives would ensure that all students, regardless of gender, receive adequate support and preparation for their future careers. Institutions should encourage exposure of students, especially those in the final year, to a wide range of career competencies before graduation thus providing students with diverse experiences and opportunities geared towards increasing their overall career readiness.

The findings show that students' areas of career needs were majorly career management and global and cultural fluency. It is therefore recommended that students in tertiary institution should be exposed to longer periods of internships and industrial training within the academic session. Usually, industrial training and internships are carried out within a single semester or session, however, for undergraduate studies which usually span between 4-6 years, a single semester or session is barely sufficient to allow for students to develop career management competence. Industrial training and internships are opportunities that will expose students to certain realities of the job market, allowing them to learn on the job while applying the knowledge they have gained from the school in the industry. Additionally, student exchange programmes and other training opportunities which allow students to interact with professionals and colleagues from diverse backgrounds and cultures should be encouraged in tertiary education. There is a need to include such allowances in the curriculum to ensure that all students are encouraged to take advantage of opportunities to improve their competence in global and cultural fluency.

The digital technology, communication, and leadership competencies of students can be further strengthened through career programmes, training, workshops, symposiums, and mentoring opportunities tailored to address these areas of need. The counselling unit at the tertiary education level should therefore design and organize programmes themed to meet these career needs.

There should be a collaborative effort between tertiary institutions and diverse stakeholders including, government agencies, and industry partners to create comprehensive and effective career development policies and initiatives tailored to meet the career needs of students at the tertiary education level.

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations of the study require attention. Firstly, the study adopted a survey approach, and the allocation of subjects was not randomized across groups. Consequently, the results lacked control for other variables between groups. Future research should consider employing longitudinal and experimental designs to facilitate group comparisons. Secondly, all constructs were measured solely through self-report methods. To enhance the reliability of the findings, it may be beneficial to replicate the questionnaire survey in different institutions. Additionally, the study did not account for other determinants such as duration of course, faculty, and socio-economic factors, which could influence the variables under examination. Finally, the study findings

are confined to Ibadan, Nigeria, limiting generalizability. Exploring more diverse environments could provide valuable insights into the topic.

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