

Perceived Soft Skills Needs of Agriculture Students in Public Universities in Niger Delta, Nigeria

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jae.v27i4.2>

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Submitted: 2nd July 2023

First Request for Revision: 28th July 2023

Revisions: 29th August 2023, 22nd September, 4th, 6th, 8th, 10th October, 2023

Accepted: 11th October, 2023

Published: 15th October 2023

Cite as: Atoma, C.N., Adesope, O.M., Mube-William, E.C. (2023). Perceived soft skills needs of agriculture students in public universities in Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Journal of Agricultural Extension* 27 (4) 13-19. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jae.v27i4.2>

Keywords: Soft skills, students, needs, universities.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest existed in this study.

Acknowledgement: The authors thank the academic staff of the various institutions used for their assistance in collecting quality data. We also appreciate the chief editor of AESON journal and all those who painstakingly reviewed the article to its present status.

Authors' contributions:

ACN (40%) Conceptualization, analyzed data, wrote the draft manuscript and carried out the editorial work of the manuscript.
AOM (45%) Conceptualization, supervised the entire research process, coordinated data collection, analyzed data and grammar editing.
MEC (15%) Data collection and wrote the original draft manuscripts.

Abstract

The study investigated the perceived soft skills needs of agriculture students in public universities in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The population of the study is 11,283 agriculture undergraduate students in the 12 public universities in states in the Niger Delta geo-political zone. The sample size was 300 agriculture undergraduate students. Multistage sampling procedure was used to select the sample. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire. Percentage and mean were used for analysis. Results revealed that the majority of the respondents (97.2%) could communicate effectively; 96% had a good sense of humour; 95.6% possessed the ability to cope with new changes; 92% possessed the ability to meet responsibilities on time; 89.6% possessed problem-solving skills. The results also revealed that agriculture students need many soft skills; some of which are creative thinking skills ($\bar{x} = 3.51$), teamwork skills ($\bar{x}=3.50$); problem-solving/decision-making skills ($\bar{x}=3.48$); and leadership/management skills ($\bar{x}=3.47$) among others. The universities should establish 6-month to 1-year student internship programmes, which will enable agriculture students to fully understand professional soft skills such as teamwork, creative thinking skills, and time management, among others that are relevant to the establishment and sustainability of agro-based enterprises.

Introduction

There is a high rate of unemployment among Nigerian youths, which includes both graduates and non-graduates. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), approximately 42.5% of Nigerian youths are unemployed. Over the years, researchers and practitioners have attributed the high rate of youth unemployment to various

factors, with one of the major factors being insufficient soft skills (Okanazu, et al, 2019). Insufficient soft skills are a leading cause of high unemployment and unemployability among Nigerian graduates (Anagor, 2022). Similarly, Ojoye (2018) contends that the absence or inadequacy of soft skills is responsible for the unemployability status of many Nigerian graduates. To prevent the escalation of unemployment and its associated threats, Nigeria can shift from theory-based education and instead focus on training its youth to acquire the skills required for suitable jobs, with one of the most critical being soft skills (Jobberman, 2021). This implies that soft skills are imperative and indispensable in the fight against the high rate of unemployment and unemployability among graduates in Nigeria.

Soft skills refer to a group of skills and abilities that individuals can possess, such as communication skills, emotional intelligence, teamwork skills, creative thinking skills, personality traits, and social skills, among others. These skills enable individuals to work effectively and efficiently with other people (Bernazzani, 2022).

Marcel (2018) defined soft skills as an amalgamation of various abilities, including social intelligence, social skills, emotional skills, communication skills, and career attributes. These skills equip individuals to understand, explore, and navigate their environment, engage in teamwork effectively and efficiently, and accomplish their short and long-term goals to complement their hard skills. The authors further stated that communication, teamwork, leadership, conflict resolution, negotiation, professionalism, and ethics are examples of soft skills.

According to Gbemisola (2021), soft skill-intensive occupations will account for two-thirds of all jobs by 2030. Soft skills have become increasingly important for a successful professional career and have become a popular talking point in the media, among employers, and among legislators in recent years (Youth Employment Funder Group, 2018).

There is a large number of skilled job seekers in today's agriculture industry, and competition for job acquisition and retention is becoming fiercer. However, in Nigeria, research has shown that the majority of graduates at the entry level of employment are not equipped with the relevant employability skills needed by the industry, making it difficult for them to access good jobs in the industries (Offia and Udoaka, 2020). Some of the reasons ascribed to the aforementioned challenging scenario among graduates include an uncondusive learning environment, inadequate teaching staff and non-academic personnel with industry experience, and over-dependence on theoretical content teaching, with little or no practical approach (Ugochukwu, Paul, and Hyginus, 2019). Students are unable to develop their soft skills to demonstrate their full potential and gain a competitive edge (Tanwar, et al., 2018).

This Soft Skills Gap is a significant issue; therefore, students should be aware of the demands and connect their abilities in order to meet future employment expectations. Research has shown that many graduate students in universities fail to meet the requirements of the world of work. This failure is often due to the misconception that business solely revolves around technical skills, without recognizing that it extends beyond acquiring skills that can help them effectively communicate and apply their technical ideas and skills in various industries. This is why students must be groomed, made future-ready, and equipped with soft skills that will enhance their employability upon graduation and improve their prospects of gaining employment and succeeding in their chosen fields of passion. Agriculture students, in particular, need to understand and acquire these soft skills to prepare themselves for the world of work. Although

numerous studies have investigated soft skills among university students, none have specifically addressed Agriculture students in public universities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This present study aims to fill this gap in the existing literature.

The main objective of the study was to examine the perceived soft skills needs of agriculture students in public universities in the Niger Delta Area of Nigeria. Thus, the specific objectives were:

- i. To ascertain the types of soft skills perceived to be possessed by agriculture students.
- ii. To determine the perceived levels of soft skills needed across these institutions.

Methodology

The Niger Delta area of Nigeria comprises all six states of the South-South geopolitical zone: Akwa-Ibom, Cross-River, Bayelsa, Rivers, Delta, and Edo. Each state in the Niger Delta hosts a public university, whether federal, state or a combination of the two. Several of these universities offer agricultural courses, catering to both undergraduate and postgraduate students who require soft skills to complement their professional skills acquired from the university.

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. The study population consisted of 11,283 undergraduate agriculture students enrolled in the 12 public universities across the Niger Delta, which encompasses six states and six federal universities.

The sample size for the study consisted of 300 agriculture undergraduate students. We employed a multistage sampling procedure to select the desired sample from the population. In the first stage, we randomly selected public universities from three Niger Delta states: Edo State, Rivers State, and Cross Rivers State.

In the second stage, a cluster sampling technique was used to categorize public universities in each of the three selected states into state and federal universities. In Edo State, this included the University of Benin and Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma. In Rivers State, it encompassed the University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University. In Cross Rivers State, it involved the University of Calabar and Cross Rivers State University of Technology.

For the third stage, we randomly selected 50 agriculture undergraduate students from each of the six public universities in the three selected states for the study.

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire, specifically the 'Perceived Soft Skills Needs of Agriculture Students in Public Universities Questionnaire' (PSSNASPUQ). Out of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 249 were completed and considered useful for the study.

To analyze research question one, we employed percentages. For the second research objective, mean and standard deviations were calculated for all factors (skills) using a four-point Likert-scale: 'strongly agree' (4 points), 'agree' (3 points), 'disagree' (2 points), and 'strongly disagree' (1 point). The cut-off mean was set at 2.50. This means that any soft skill with a mean score of 2.50 or higher was considered needed or possessed among the students, while any soft skill with a mean score below 2.50 was considered not needed or not possessed among the students.

Results and Discussion

Perceived types of soft skills possessed by agriculture students

Based on the findings in Table 1, respondents exhibited fourteen (14) identified types of soft skills. The results show that the majority of the respondents (97.2%) could communicate effectively, 96% had a good sense of humour, 95.6% possessed the ability to adapt to new changes and source information online, 92% had the ability to meet responsibilities on time, 89.6% had problem-solving skills and the ability to generate alternative solutions, 88.4% possessed good teamwork skills, 88% had the ability to initiate farm projects with minimal supervision, 87.1% had innovative skills, 84.7% had the ability to coordinate and handle affairs of others, 83.9% could generate ideas for execution, 83.1% had the ability to evaluate circumstances, and 80.7% could work under pressure. These findings align with those of Aiyedun (2019), who discovered that undergraduate students in Nigerian universities possess communication skills, time management skills, creative skills, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, and interpersonal skills. The findings of this study are also consistent with those of Ismail, Ahmad, and Awang (2018), who found that students possessed communication skills, leadership skills, time management skills, and work ethics.

Table 1: Perceived types of soft skills possessed by agriculture students in universities

Soft Skills Possessed	Percentage
Communicate effectively.	97.2
Good sense of humour.	96.0
Ability to cope with changes.	95.6
Ability to source information online.	95.6
Ability to meet up to responsibilities on time.	92.0
Problem solving.	89.6
Ability to generate alternative solutions.	89.6
Good team player.	88.4
Ability to start farm projects with minimal supervision.	88.0
Innovativeness	87.1
Ability to coordinate and handle affairs of others.	84.7
Ability to create ideas for execution.	83.9
Ability to evaluate circumstances.	83.1
Ability to work under pressure.	80.7
Multiple responses recorded	

Source: Field survey, 2023

Perceived Types of Soft Skills Needed by Agriculture Students

Table 2 illustrates the types of soft skills required by agriculture students in universities in Niger. Creative thinking skills, with a mean of 3.51 (SD = 2.08), top the list of needed soft skills by agriculture students, followed by teamwork skills ($\bar{x} = 3.50$, SD = 2.06), problem-solving/decision-making skills ($\bar{x} = 3.48$, SD = 2.04), leadership/management skills ($\bar{x} = 3.47$, SD = 2.02), digital skills ($\bar{x} = 3.44$, SD = 2.04), communication skills ($\bar{x} = 3.42$, SD = 2.06), adaptability skills ($\bar{x} = 3.39$, SD = 2.10), critical thinking skills ($\bar{x} = 3.38$, SD = 2.11), and time management skills ($\bar{x} = 3.36$, SD = 2.12). The least needed soft skill is interpersonal skills, ($\bar{x} = 3.27$, SD = 2.11).

The mean of all the soft skills indicates that university students require all these skills, as all the soft skills achieved mean scores higher than the cut-off mean of 2.50.

However, the varying standard deviations indicate differing levels of consensus among respondents. Skills such as creativity and teamwork have relatively lower standard deviations, suggesting more agreement among respondents, while skills like critical thinking and time management have higher standard deviations, indicating more diverse opinions.

This is in line with the findings of Oluwalola (2021), who discovered that undergraduate students require various soft skills, including teamwork, communication, leadership, time management, problem-solving, and analytical skills. These findings align with those of Sacpudim et al. (2022), which emphasize the importance of communication, teamwork, and decision-making skills among undergraduate students. Similarly, this study's results corroborate the findings of Sarker et al (2021), who assert that students need essential soft skills like critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. Sharma and Dayanand (2023) also argue that soft skills are indispensable for university students as they facilitate exploration of their environment and enhance employability. Furthermore, these findings provide further support for the conclusions of Murugan et al (2020), on the significance of communication, decision-making, work ethics, problem-solving, and time management skills, among other soft skills. These findings also align with Oviawe's (2020) perspective that university students should possess soft skills such as communication, creative thinking, critical thinking, and collaborative/teamwork skills.

Table 2: Perceived types of soft skills needed by agriculture students in universities.

Types of soft skills needed	Mean	Standard Deviation
Creative thinking skills	3.51*	2.08
Team work skills	3.50*	2.06
Problem solving/ decision making skills	3.48*	2.04
Leadership/management skills	3.47*	2.02
Digital skills	3.44*	2.04
Communication skills	3.42*	2.06
Adaptability skills	3.39*	2.10
Critical thinking skills	3.38*	2.11
Time management skills	3.36*	2.12
Interpersonal skills	3.27*	2.11

* ≥ 2.50 Agreed

Conclusion and Recommendations

Agriculture students in universities in the Niger Delta region understand the importance of acquiring soft skills. These students possess various soft skills, including communication, adaptability, digital literacy, teamwork, ethics, interpersonal abilities, leadership, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving skills. Among these soft skills, the most essential ones for students are creative thinking, teamwork, problem-solving and decision-making, leadership and management, digital literacy, communication, adaptability, critical thinking, and time management. On the other hand, interpersonal skills are considered the least vital.

Efforts should be made by university management in collaboration with the Faculty of Agriculture to expose students to conferences, seminars, and workshops that facilitate the acquisition of additional soft skills. Universities should establish 6-month to 1-year student internship programs to help agriculture students fully grasp professional soft

skills such as teamwork, creative thinking, time management, punctuality, and effective communication. Students should engage in skill development through group dynamics, including interactions among students and between students and teachers in problem-based courses. These initiatives will contribute to the enhancement of their leadership and communication skills, among others.

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