

Development of Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS): Construct Identification, Item Generation, and Content Validation

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Abstract: The lack of context-specific instruments for assessing undergraduate employability skills has limited efforts to evaluate graduates' workplace readiness in Nigerian universities. This study developed the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS) through systematic construct identification, scenario-based item development, and expert validation. The study employed the initial phase of a sequential exploratory mixed-method design. Construct identification integrated evidence from a systematic literature review of 55 studies and key informant interviews with 19 employers. Qualitative content analysis, descriptive statistics, and methodological triangulation identified 24 employability skill domains, of which seven, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, digital literacy, decision-making, leadership, and interpersonal skills, received consistent support from both evidence sources and were retained as the conceptual framework for the instrument. Based on these domains, an initial pool of 175 scenario-based items was developed to assess undergraduate employability skills in authentic academic, workplace, and social contexts. Face validation by experts resulted in the removal of 21 ambiguous or redundant items, leaving 154 items for content validation. Subsequent expert evaluation using Lawshe's Content Validity Ratio (CVR) eliminated an additional 49 items, yielding a preliminary 105-item instrument. The findings provide satisfactory evidence of content validity and demonstrate that integrating systematic literature review, employer perspectives, scenario-based assessment, and expert validation can produce a theoretically grounded and contextually relevant employability assessment instrument. The preliminary UESS provides a strong foundation for subsequent psychometric evaluation and offers a practical tool for assessing undergraduate employability skills in Nigerian universities.

Keywords: undergraduate employability skills, employability assessment, scenario-based assessment, scale development, content validity, higher education.

Introduction

The nature of work has changed considerably over the last two decades. Rapid technological advancement, digital transformation, globalization, and evolving workplace expectations have reshaped the competencies required for graduates to succeed in contemporary labor markets. Consequently, universities are increasingly expected to produce graduates who possess not only sound disciplinary knowledge but also a broad range of transferable skills that enable them to adapt to changing work environments, collaborate effectively, solve complex problems, and engage in lifelong learning. These developments have elevated graduate employability from a desirable educational outcome to a central indicator of institutional quality and effectiveness in higher education (Jackson, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2020).

Rather than being viewed simply as the ability to secure employment after graduation, employability is now understood as a multidimensional construct comprising the knowledge, competencies, personal attributes, and career-management capabilities that enable individuals to obtain meaningful employment, perform successfully in the workplace, and sustain long-term career development (Holmes, 2013; Suleman, 2018). This broader perspective reflects employers' growing emphasis on graduates' ability to communicate effectively, work collaboratively, think critically, solve problems, demonstrate leadership, make informed decisions, and utilize digital technologies in increasingly complex organizational settings (Jackson, 2014; Clarke, 2018). As economies become more knowledge-driven, these transferable competencies have become as valuable as disciplinary expertise in determining graduates' workplace success.

Although higher education institutions have responded by embedding employability into curricula and student development initiatives, concerns about graduates' readiness for employment persist, particularly in developing economies. In Nigeria, graduate unemployment and underemployment remain significant national challenges despite the continued expansion of university education. Employers frequently report that many graduates lack the practical competencies, workplace behaviors, and transferable skills required for effective job performance, creating a persistent mismatch between university training and labor market

expectations (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022; Ogunsola & Kazeroony, 2024). Recent Nigerian studies similarly emphasize that strengthening graduate employability requires closer collaboration between higher education institutions and industry, greater emphasis on workplace learning, and curriculum reforms that prioritize competency development alongside academic achievement (Adegbite & Hoole, 2024; Ogunniran et al., 2024).

Addressing these concerns requires reliable and contextually appropriate methods for assessing employability competencies. Over the years, researchers have developed several instruments to measure graduate employability, many of which have advanced understanding of the multidimensional nature of the construct. However, most existing measures were developed in Europe, North America, Australia, or parts of Asia, where educational systems, labor market structures, and employer expectations differ substantially from those found in sub-Saharan Africa (Boateng et al., 2018; Okolie et al., 2020). Consequently, instruments developed in these settings may not fully capture the realities of Nigerian universities or the competencies valued within the local labor market. Furthermore, many available employability instruments employed traditional self-report Likert-type statements, which may be susceptible to socially desirable responses and may not adequately capture behavioral judgement in realistic workplace situations.

Scenario-based assessment offers an alternative approach by presenting respondents with realistic situations requiring practical judgement and behavioral decision-making. Such assessments provide richer evidence of behavioral competence because respondents demonstrate how they are likely to respond to real life situations rather than merely indicating agreement with abstract statements. Despite the advantages of this approach, there remains a scarcity of scenario-based instruments specifically designed to assess undergraduate employability skills within South West universities in Nigeria.

To address this gap, the present study developed the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS) using a systematic instrument development process. Drawing on evidence from a systematic literature review and employer interviews, the study identified the core domains of undergraduate employability skills, generated scenario-based items reflecting real-life workplace and academic situations, and established evidence of content validity through expert evaluation. This article presents the initial phase of the scale development process, focusing on construct identification, item generation, and content validation, thereby providing the conceptual and methodological foundation for subsequent psychometric evaluation.

Developing a valid and reliable measurement instrument involves considerably more than compiling a list of desirable competencies. Scale development is a rigorous and iterative process that begins with clear conceptualization of the construct, followed by systematic item generation, expert review, and empirical evaluation to establish the validity and reliability of the instrument (Hinkin, 1998; Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). More recent methodological guidelines emphasize that careful construct identification, content validation, and psychometric testing are fundamental to producing instruments that accurately measure the intended constructs across different populations and contexts (DeVellis, 2017; Boateng et al., 2018). Among these procedures, content validation by subject-matter experts plays a particularly important role because it ensures that the generated items adequately represent the construct domain, are conceptually relevant, and are sufficiently clear before large-scale field administration. Adhering to these established procedures strengthens the theoretical foundation and psychometric quality of newly developed instruments, thereby enhancing their credibility for research, policy, and educational practice.

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing scholarly attention to graduate employability, there is limited availability of contextually relevant instruments for assessing the employability skills of Nigerian undergraduates. Most existing employability measures were developed in different educational and labour market contexts and rely predominantly on conventional self-report Likert-type items, which may not adequately capture behavioral judgement in realistic workplace situations. Consequently, their applicability to Nigerian universities remains uncertain. Although scenario-based assessment offers a more reliable approach to evaluating employability competencies, there is a paucity of validated scenario-based instruments specifically developed for undergraduates in Nigeria. This study therefore sought to address this gap by developing the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS) through systematic construct identification, scenario-based item generation, and content validation.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to develop the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS) through systematic construct identification, scenario-based item generation, and content validation. The study specifically sought to:

1. identify the core domains of undergraduate employability skills;
2. establish the content validity of the generated items.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What core employability skill domains emerge in the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS)?
2. To what extent do the generated scenario-based items demonstrate satisfactory evidence of content validity?

Methodology

This study reports the initial phase of a larger study that adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-method design (qual → QUANT). The design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to identify the construct domains of undergraduate employability skills through qualitative procedures before developing and establishing the content validity of the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS). The qualitative phase comprised a systematic literature review and key informant interviews with employers of labor, while the quantitative phase focused on scenario-based item development and expert validation. This combination of qualitative and quantitative procedures ensured that the scale was theoretically grounded and reflected contemporary workplace expectations.

Construct Identification

Construct identification constituted the first stage of the scale development process because employability skills represent a multidimensional construct that has been conceptualized differently across the literature. Consistent with the procedure adopted in the thesis, construct identification employed both deductive and inductive approaches.

The deductive approach involved a systematic literature review (SLR) conducted in accordance with the framework proposed by Kitchenham (2007). The review examined published studies on employability skills to identify the competencies most frequently associated with graduate employability. This process identified 24 employability skills reported across previous studies.

The inductive approach consisted of key informant interviews with selected employers of labour from relevant sectors. The interviews explored the competencies employers considered essential for successful workplace performance. Analysis of the interview data revealed that although employers mentioned a wide range of workplace competencies, seven skills consistently emerged as the most important: communication, decision-making, digital literacy, interpersonal, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork skills.

Findings from the literature review and employer interviews were subsequently triangulated. Although 24 employability skills were initially identified, the comparison demonstrated that these seven domains were consistently supported by both theoretical evidence and employer expectations. Therefore, they were adopted as the conceptual framework underpinning the development of the UESS.

Item Generation

Guided by the seven identified domains, an initial pool of 175 scenario-based items was developed, with 25 items representing each employability skill domain. The scenario-based format was adopted to assess respondents' judgement in realistic academic, workplace, and social situations rather than relying solely on conventional self-report statements.

Within each domain, the first 15 items required respondents to identify and rank the four most appropriate responses from five alternatives, whereas the remaining 10 items required respondents to select the single most appropriate response. A relatively large initial item pool was intentionally developed to permit the removal of weak, overlapping, or redundant items during subsequent validation while maintaining adequate representation of each construct. This approach is consistent with recommendations that the initial item pool should substantially exceed the anticipated final number of items in scale development studies.

Face and Content Validation

The draft version of the UESS first underwent face validation to assess the clarity, readability, and suitability of the items for the target population. The instrument was reviewed by experts in Educational Evaluation, who evaluated the wording, simplicity, and appropriateness of each scenario-based item. Based on their recommendations, 21 items were removed because they were ambiguous or inadequately represented the intended construct, leaving 154 items for content validation.

The refined instrument was subsequently subjected to content validation by six experts drawn from Educational Evaluation, Human Resource Management, and industry. The experts independently assessed the relevance, clarity, representativeness, and appropriateness of each item. Content validity was established using Lawshe's (1975) Content Validity Ratio (CVR). Only items with a CVR of 0.60 or higher were retained. Following this evaluation, 49 items were removed, resulting in a 105-item preliminary version of the GUESS, which demonstrated satisfactory evidence of face and content validity and was considered suitable for pilot testing and subsequent psychometric evaluation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in two sequential phases: construct identification and item validation. During the construct identification phase, qualitative content analysis was used to identify employability skill domains from the systematic literature review and employer interviews. Employability skills extracted from the 55 selected studies and the interviews with 19 employers were coded, grouped into conceptually similar categories, and synthesized into common domains. Frequencies and percentages were then calculated to determine how often each domain appeared across the two data sources. The findings were subsequently integrated through methodological triangulation to examine the extent of agreement between the literature and employer perspectives. Skill domains that received consistent support from both sources were retained as the core constructs of the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS), whereas those with limited support or substantial conceptual overlap with the retained domains were excluded.

The second phase focused on validating the scenario-based items developed to represent the retained employability skill domains. Face validation was first conducted through expert review to assess the clarity, readability, appropriateness, and representativeness of the items. Based on the experts' recommendations, ambiguous, repetitive, and poorly worded items were revised or removed. The refined item pool was then subjected to content validation using Lawshe's Content Validity Ratio (CVR). Subject-matter experts evaluated the essentiality of each item in measuring its intended employability skill domain, and items that did not meet the predetermined CVR retention criterion were eliminated. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the number of items retained and removed at each stage of the validation process. The resulting preliminary version of the UESS demonstrated satisfactory evidence of content validity and was considered suitable for pilot testing and subsequent psychometric evaluation.

Results

The findings are presented according to the two research questions that guided the study.

Research Question One

What core employability skill domains should be included in the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS)?

Table 3: Triangulation of Employability Skill Domains Identified Through the Systematic Literature Review (n = 55 Studies) and Employer Interviews (n = 19)

Employability Skill	SLR, n = 55 <i>f</i> (%)	Employer Interviews, n = 19 <i>f</i> (%)	Decision
Communication skills	53 (96.4)	19 (100.0)	Retained
Problem-solving skills	52 (94.5)	19 (100.0)	Retained
Teamwork skills	50 (90.9)	18 (94.7)	Retained
Digital literacy skills	47 (85.5)	17 (89.5)	Retained
Decision-making skills	45 (81.8)	16 (84.2)	Retained
Leadership skills	43 (78.2)	15 (78.9)	Retained
Interpersonal skills	41 (74.5)	15 (78.9)	Retained
Critical thinking	39 (70.9)	14 (73.7)	Not retained
Adaptability	36 (65.5)	13 (68.4)	Not retained
Creativity skills	34 (61.8)	12 (63.2)	Not retained
Initiative	31 (56.4)	12 (63.2)	Not retained
Analytical skills	28 (50.9)	10 (52.6)	Not retained
Time management	27 (49.1)	10 (52.6)	Not retained
Self-management	25 (45.5)	9 (47.4)	Not retained
Willingness to learn	23 (41.8)	9 (47.4)	Not retained
Integrity	21 (38.2)	8 (42.1)	Not retained
Work ethics	20 (36.4)	8 (42.1)	Not retained
Flexibility	18 (32.7)	7 (36.8)	Not retained
Proactivity	17 (30.9)	7 (36.8)	Not retained
Attention to detail	15 (27.3)	6 (31.6)	Not retained
Honesty	14 (25.5)	5 (26.3)	Not retained
Punctuality	12 (21.8)	5 (26.3)	Not retained
Proper appearance	10 (18.2)	4 (21.1)	Not retained
Resilience	8 (14.5)	4 (21.1)	Not retained

Table 3 presents the triangulation of employability skill domains identified through the systematic literature review and employer interviews. The review synthesized evidence from 55 studies and identified 24 employability skill domains, which were subsequently compared with data from interviews with 19 employers. The triangulation showed strong convergence between the two evidence sources. Specifically, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, digital literacy, decision-making, leadership and interpersonal

skills were consistently identified in both the literature and employer interviews. These seven domains were therefore retained as the core constructs of the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS).

Although the remaining 17 skill domains were identified in the literature and/or employer interviews, they were excluded because they received limited support across both evidence sources or overlapped conceptually with the retained domains. The seven retained domains subsequently guided the development of the preliminary pool of scenario-based items for the UESS.

Research Question Two: To what extent do the generated scenario-based items demonstrate satisfactory content validity?

Table 2: Summary of Face and Content Validation

Validation Stage	Number of Items
Initial item pool	175
Removed after face validation	21
Items retained after face validation	154
Removed after content validation	49
Preliminary validated instrument	105

Table 2 present the summary of face and content validation. The 175 scenario-based items first underwent face validation to evaluate their clarity, readability, and suitability for the target population. Based on expert feedback, items that were ambiguous, repetitive, or insufficiently representative of the intended constructs were removed or revised. Following this process, 154 items remained for content validation.

The refined instrument was subsequently evaluated by experts using Lawshe's Content Validity Ratio (CVR). Each item was assessed for its relevance and essentiality in measuring the intended employability skill domain. Items that failed to satisfy the predetermined retention criterion were excluded from the instrument. This resulted in the removal of 49 additional items, leaving a preliminary 105-item version of the UESS as the preliminary version for pilot testing and further psychometric evaluation.

Table 3: Overall Item Retention

Stage	Items Retained	Items Removed
Face validation	154	21
Content validation	105	49
Overall	105	70

As observed in table 3, the progressive reduction of items during the validation process enhanced the clarity, representativeness, and relevance of the instrument while preserving comprehensive coverage of the seven employability skill domains. The resulting preliminary version of the UESS therefore demonstrated satisfactory evidence of content validity and was considered appropriate for pilot testing and subsequent psychometric evaluation.

Discussion

This study developed the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS) through a systematic process that involved construct identification, scenario-based item development, and expert validation. The findings provide initial evidence that the instrument is conceptually sound and content valid, thereby laying the foundation for subsequent psychometric evaluation. The discussion is organized according to the two research objectives.

Construct Identification and Scenario-Based Item Development

The first objective was to identify the core employability skill domains that should underpin the UESS. The findings demonstrated that communication, problem-solving, teamwork, digital literacy, decision-making, leadership, and interpersonal skills consistently emerged from both the systematic literature review and employer interviews. The convergence of evidence from these two independent sources suggests that these domains represent the competencies most essential for graduate employability within the Nigerian labor market.

The identified domains are consistent with contemporary models of employability, which conceptualize employability as a multidimensional construct encompassing transferable knowledge, skills, and personal attributes rather than disciplinary knowledge alone (Jackson, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017; Suleman, 2018). In particular, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving have been widely recognized as foundational competencies that enable graduates to function effectively in increasingly collaborative and knowledge-driven workplaces. Similarly, the prominence of digital literacy reflects the growing influence of digital technologies across virtually every occupational sector, while leadership, interpersonal, and decision-making skills underscore employers' increasing expectations that graduates should be capable of exercising initiative, working collaboratively, and making sound judgments in complex work environments.

An important contribution of this study is the integration of employer perspectives into the construct identification process. Previous employability measures have frequently been developed from theoretical frameworks or adapted from instruments designed in different educational and labor market contexts. By incorporating the views of employers alongside evidence synthesized from the literature, this study ensured that the retained domains reflect both established theory and the competencies currently valued in the Nigerian workplace. This triangulation enhances the contextual relevance and practical utility of the UESS and strengthens its potential application within Nigerian higher education.

Beyond identifying the domains, this study translated each construct into scenario-based assessment items that reflect authentic academic, workplace, and social situations likely to be encountered by undergraduate students. This represents an important methodological contribution because employability is inherently behavioral and context-dependent. Assessing students through realistic scenarios provides a more authentic indication of how they are likely to respond to practical situations than traditional self-report statements that primarily measure perceptions or self-beliefs.

Content Validation of the UESS

The second objective was to establish evidence of content validity for the scenario-based items developed for the UESS. The findings demonstrated that the expert review process substantially improved the quality of the instrument by eliminating ambiguous, redundant, and conceptually weak items while preserving adequate representation of each employability domain. The reduction of the initial item pool from 175 to 105 items illustrates the importance of systematic item refinement in developing a psychometrically sound instrument.

The application of Lawshe's (1975) Content Validity Ratio (CVR) provided a rigorous and transparent framework for evaluating item essentiality. The involvement of experts from educational evaluation, human resource management, and industry ensured that decisions regarding item retention reflected both psychometric standards and workplace expectations. These findings are consistent with recommendations in scale development literature, which emphasize expert evaluation as a critical step in establishing the representativeness and relevance of measurement items before empirical validation.

One distinctive feature of the UESS is its scenario-based assessment format. Unlike conventional employability instruments that rely primarily on agreement with declarative statements, the UESS requires respondents to evaluate realistic situations and select responses that best reflect how they would behave. This format aligns more closely with the behavioral nature of employability and has the potential to reduce socially desirable responding by shifting respondents' attention from expressing favorable opinions to making judgments in contextually relevant situations. Consequently, the instrument may provide a more meaningful assessment of employability skills than traditional self-report measures.

The systematic procedures adopted in this study, including construct identification through methodological triangulation, scenario-based item generation, and expert validation—provide a strong conceptual and methodological foundation for subsequent psychometric analyses. Although additional evidence from exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, construct validity, and reliability testing is required before the instrument can be considered fully validated, the present findings demonstrate that the UESS possesses satisfactory content validity and is appropriate for pilot testing and further validation.

This study demonstrates that combining theoretical evidence with employer perspectives and rigorous expert review can produce a contextually relevant employability assessment instrument. The development process adopted in this study also offers a practical methodological framework for researchers seeking to develop culturally and contextually appropriate instruments within higher education and related fields.

Conclusion

This study developed the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS) through a systematic process of construct identification, scenario-based item development, and expert validation. Seven employability skill domains were identified through the triangulation of evidence from a systematic literature review and employer interviews, providing a theoretically grounded and contextually relevant framework for the instrument. Subsequent face and content validation refined the initial item pool into a preliminary 105-item instrument that demonstrated satisfactory evidence of content validity. Collectively, these findings establish a solid foundation for the subsequent psychometric evaluation of the UESS and represent an important step toward the development of a robust instrument for assessing undergraduate employability skills in Nigeria.

Implications of the Study

1. **Implications for Higher Education Institutions:** The Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS) provides universities with a contextually relevant instrument for assessing students' employability skills across the seven identified domains. The

instrument can be used to identify competency gaps, evaluate the effectiveness of curricular and co-curricular interventions, and support evidence-based curriculum review aimed at strengthening graduate employability.

2. Implications for Employers: The UESS offers employers a practical framework for communicating the employability competencies expected of graduates. It can also facilitate stronger collaboration between universities and industry in designing workplace-oriented learning experiences, internships, mentorship programs, and other initiatives that promote graduates' workplace readiness.
3. Implications for Policymakers and Quality Assurance Agencies: The findings provide empirical evidence that can inform policies and quality assurance initiatives focused on graduate employability. The UESS may serve as a valuable resource for monitoring employability outcomes, guiding curriculum reform, and promoting stronger alignment between higher education programs and labor market demands.
4. Implications for Researchers: This study contributes to the employability literature by introducing a context-specific, scenario-based assessment instrument developed through a systematic mixed-method approach. The procedures employed in construct identification, scenario-based item development, and expert validation provide a methodological framework that may guide future instrument development and validation studies in education and related social science disciplines.
5. Implications for Employability Assessment: The adoption of a scenario-based assessment format represents an important methodological advancement in employability measurement. By requiring respondents to make judgments in realistic academic, workplace, and social situations, the UESS has the potential to provide more authentic evidence of employability competencies than conventional self-report measures, thereby enhancing the assessment of undergraduate workplace readiness.

Recommendations

- i. Universities should adopt the Undergraduate Employability Skills Scale (UESS) as a formative assessment tool for periodically evaluating undergraduates' employability skills, identifying competency gaps, and informing interventions aimed at enhancing workplace readiness.
- ii. Higher education institutions should strengthen the development of the seven identified employability skill domains, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, digital literacy, decision-making, leadership, and interpersonal skills, by embedding authentic, scenario-based learning activities, work-integrated learning, internships, and collaborative industry projects into academic programs.
- iii. University administrators and curriculum developers should incorporate the UESS into institutional quality assurance and curriculum evaluation processes to monitor students' employability skill development and assess the effectiveness of employability-focused educational initiatives.
- iv. Policymakers, regulatory agencies, and university management should encourage stronger collaboration between higher education institutions and industry to ensure that employability development aligns with contemporary labor market expectations and supports the production of work-ready graduates.
- v. Future studies should subject the UESS to comprehensive psychometric evaluation, including exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, reliability assessment, and tests of construct, convergent, discriminant, and criterion-related validity.
- v. The instrument should also be cross-validated across different university types and geographical regions to establish its broader applicability within the Nigerian higher education system.

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