

Navigating Language Educator's Career Transitions from Graduation to Professional Success in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper attempts to navigate the complex landscape of career transitions from graduation to professional success in the challenging Nigerian job market. It examines the realities of the evolving job market in Nigeria, including the skills gap, graduate influx, and the informal sector. The paper emphasizes the critical need for graduates to develop essential qualities to thrive amidst underemployment, unemployment, unemployability, and complex career dynamics. It highlights skills such as self-awareness, soft and hard skills development, networking, resume and cover letter writing, interview and communication skills, and personal attributes like humility, proactivity, resilience, and creativity. The paper provides recommendations tailored to the Nigerian context, with a specific focus on language education.

Keywords: career transition, professional success, language education, self-employment, underemployment

Introduction

Discussions on career choice, development, and success are of significant interest, particularly for youth, who represent a crucial segment of the society with their energy, creativity, potential, and vulnerability (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The term "career" refers to an individual's calling, occupation, or profession, encompassing their vocation, livelihood, and professional contributions to societal development (Wiktionary.org, 2024). A career can span various professions, including teaching, accounting, engineering, medicine, law, skilled crafts, and athletics. "Transition" denotes a process of change from one state, form, or place to another, akin to metamorphosis or evolution.

Career transition, therefore, describes two primary situations. First, it can refer to a change from one profession to another, such as an accountant becoming a teacher. This involves adapting to the new profession's behaviours, ethics, and expectations (перехода, 2024). Second, it describes the metamorphosis of a graduate or trainee into a professional. For instance, a medical graduate progresses through stages like internship and national service before entering the labor market and securing a job. In this context, graduates must understand the Nigerian landscape, develop self-awareness, build networks, acquire necessary skills, and consider the informal sector

(International Labour Organization, 2022). This paper will specifically address career transitions within language education in Nigeria, highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities in this field.

Understanding the Nigerian Landscape

The Nigerian job market is dynamic, and graduates must consider key factors as they enter it. These factors, including the skills gap, graduate influx, and the informal sector, significantly impact career transitions, particularly in language education. In what follows, an attempt has been made to discuss them clearly.

Skills gap

A significant disconnect exists between the skills graduates possess and those employers require (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). Studies have highlighted a substantial skills gap in Nigeria, with a 2012 study finding a 60.6% mismatch between skills demand and supply (Okogba, 2012). The World Bank (2015) has also reported a shortage of critical skills, especially in communication, ICT, and decision-making. These include non-routine cognitive skills like analytical, problem-solving, and critical thinking abilities (Adewale & Oluleye, 2021). For language education graduates, this gap may manifest in a lack of proficiency in modern pedagogical techniques, digital literacy for online teaching, or specialized language skills relevant to the current needs of the educational sector. Graduates lacking the required skills may face underemployment, unemployment, or unemployability (Anyadike-Danes, Oyebamiji, & Paija, 2015).

To address this, language education graduates can pursue professional certifications, short courses, and online platforms to develop skills. They can also focus on enhancing soft skills like communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills, which are highly valued by employers in educational institutions and language-related organizations.

Graduate influx

Nigeria experiences a high number of graduates competing for a limited number of positions, driven by population growth, the proliferation of tertiary institutions, and globalization (National Universities Commission, 2023). While precise data on graduates by field of study can be challenging to obtain, the oversupply of graduates compared to available job opportunities is evident. This situation leads to prolonged job searches and a greater emphasis on relevant skills

and experience (Fasore, 2020). For language education, this influx means that new graduates face stiff competition for teaching positions in schools, universities, and language centers. Many graduates may experience unemployment or underemployment, with their qualifications not being fully utilized.

Government initiatives, such as skills development and entrepreneurial support programmes, can help mitigate these challenges. Language education graduates can leverage these programmes to enhance their employability and explore alternative career paths, such as private tutoring, language consulting, or curriculum development.

Informal sector

The informal sector plays a significant role in Nigeria's economy, offering job opportunities, entrepreneurial skills, networking opportunities, apprenticeship models, and skills development (Akinwale, 2018). It is a major employer, absorbing a large percentage of the workforce, including those who struggle to find formal employment due to the skills gap or graduate influx. In language education, the informal sector includes private tutoring, language centers, and online teaching platforms. These avenues provide opportunities for graduates to gain experience, build a portfolio, and supplement their income while seeking formal employment. Although the informal sector presents challenges like job insecurity and limited growth potential, it can be a valuable stepping stone for language education graduates. Many language teachers begin their careers in private tutoring or informal language schools before transitioning to more stable, formal positions.

Equipping Oneself for Success

To navigate the Nigerian job market successfully, language education graduates must equip themselves with essential skills and qualities. This includes self-awareness, skills assessment, networking abilities, resume and cover letter writing skills, interview skills, and a proactive approach. Any graduate who chooses to ignore these does so at their own peril. In the sub-sections below, these are given a close look.

Self-awareness and skills assessment

Self-awareness and skills assessment are crucial for navigating career transitions in Nigeria's dynamic job market. Language education graduates must identify their strengths, weaknesses, interests, and values in the context of the language education sector. They need to evaluate their academic qualifications and skills gained during their studies, including language proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, and curriculum development abilities. Considering internships, volunteer work, or freelance projects can enhance their practical experience and make them more competitive in the job market.

Developing self-awareness involves self-reflection to identify strengths, areas for improvement, values, motivations, interests, and learning styles. Strategies such as journaling, personality and skills assessments, and seeking feedback from mentors and professors can be valuable tools (Brown, 2016). For language education graduates, this could involve reflecting on their teaching experiences, language proficiencies, and their passion for specific areas within language education, such as second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, or language policy.

Skills assessment involves researching career paths, networking, conducting informational interviews, and job shadowing (Bolles, 2021). Language education graduates can research various career options, including teaching at different levels, working in language-related NGOs, or pursuing careers in publishing or translation. They can network with experienced language educators, attend conferences, and seek informational interviews to gain insights into the skills and qualifications employers seek in the field.

Cultivating self-awareness and assessment skills enables language education graduates to make informed career decisions, target their job search effectively, improve their interview performance, and adapt to the evolving professional environment.

Building your network

Building a strong network is essential for language education graduates seeking employment in Nigeria. Networking can be categorized into leveraging existing networks and building new connections. These are necessary skills all language teacher trainees should not fail to cultivate. The sub-sections below expand upon these points.

Leveraging existing networks

Language education graduates can leverage their university network, including professors and career services, and alumni networks (Granovetter, 1973). Professors may have connections in language-related organizations or educational institutions, while alumni can offer valuable career advice and job leads. Friends, family, and acquaintances can also provide unexpected connections and introductions to relevant people in the language education field.

Building new connections

Building new connections involves utilizing professional networking platforms like LinkedIn, attending industry events and conferences, and engaging in volunteer work or professional associations (Smith, 2005). Platforms like LinkedIn can connect graduates with professionals in language education, while conferences and workshops provide opportunities to meet potential employers and learn about current trends. Volunteering at language-related organizations or joining professional associations like the Nigerian English Studies Association (NESA) can expand a graduate's network and provide valuable experience.

Effective networking involves researching contacts before reaching out, being proactive and professional in communication, focusing on building genuine relationships, following up and staying connected, leveraging online communities, and participating in programs like the NYSC Skill Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (SAED) programme (National Youth Service Corps, 2024). Language education graduates can also benefit from networking within language teachers' associations and online forums dedicated to language education in Nigeria.

Resume and cover letter writing

Crafting compelling resumes and cover letters is crucial for language education graduates in Nigeria's competitive job market. These documents serve as the first impression to potential employers and should be tailored to each specific job application. In what comes below, these relevant issues are given some attention.

Crafting a stellar resume

A resume summarizes a graduate's qualifications and should be formatted for readability, focusing on achievements, using relevant keywords and action verbs, and highlighting relevant projects and activities (Beatty, 2018). Language education graduates should emphasize their language proficiency, teaching experience, curriculum development skills, and any research or publications.

Quantifying achievements whenever possible, such as "Developed a new curriculum that improved students' language proficiency by 15%," can make a resume more impactful.

Crafting a compelling cover letter

A cover letter introduces the graduate and their interest in the specific job, highlighting their relevant skills and experiences (Parker, 2020). It should grab the reader's attention in the introduction, demonstrate an understanding of the employer's mission, clearly connect the graduate's skills to the job requirements, and conclude with a strong call to action. For language education graduates, the cover letter should emphasize their passion for teaching, their understanding of current trends in language education, and their commitment to student success. Keeping the cover letter concise and error-free is essential.

Many Nigerian job boards and recruitment agencies offer resume and cover letter writing tips tailored to the Nigerian context. Language education graduates can also utilize online resume builders and consult career services professionals for guidance.

Interview skills for Nigerian graduates

Succeeding in interviews is crucial for language education graduates to secure their desired jobs in Nigeria. Developing strong interview skills involves preparation before, during, and after the interview. Each has its peculiar skills that a graduate should be conversant with.

Before the interview, graduates should research the employer and the position, prepare answers to common interview questions, and plan their attire (Dress for Success, 2024). For language education positions, this might include researching the school's language programmes, understanding the curriculum, and preparing to discuss their teaching philosophy and classroom management techniques.

During the interview, arriving early, making a positive first impression, listening actively, highlighting skills and achievements, expressing enthusiasm, and asking questions are essential (Guffey, Loewy, & Steffy, 2016). Language education graduates should be prepared to discuss their teaching experience, their use of technology in the classroom, and their strategies for engaging students in language learning.

After the interview, sending a thank-you note is crucial to reiterate interest in the position. Additional tips for Nigerian graduates include practicing interview skills, being culturally aware, and highlighting their work ethic and resourcefulness. In the context of language education, this might involve demonstrating an understanding of the importance of language in Nigerian culture and the ability to adapt teaching methods to diverse student populations.

Embracing the Hustle

Embracing a proactive and persistent mindset is valuable for language education graduates navigating Nigeria's job market. This involves being forward-looking, tenacious, and resilient, without compromising ethical principles.

Graduates should not solely rely on job boards but should actively reach out to schools and educational organizations, express their interest, and follow up on applications. Networking actively, considering freelance or contract work, and developing multiple income streams can also be beneficial. For language education graduates, this might involve offering private tutoring services, developing online language courses, or working as freelance curriculum developers while seeking full-time employment.

Continuous learning is essential to stay updated with industry trends and enhance employability (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2014). Graduates should utilize free learning resources and pursue professional development opportunities to expand their skillset. Language education graduates can attend workshops on new language teaching methodologies, take online courses on educational technology, and pursue certifications in specialized areas like English as a Second Language (ESL) or curriculum design.

Maintaining a positive attitude and focusing on career goals are crucial for overcoming the challenges of the job search. Resilience and perseverance are qualities that employers value, especially in the Nigerian context.

Choosing Between Multiple Job Offers

Receiving multiple job offers is a favorable situation that requires careful consideration to make the best decision. Evaluating each offer systematically involves creating a scorecard with important factors like salary, benefits, company culture, growth potential, work-life balance, commute, and learning opportunities (Pfeffer, 2007). Each offer should be rated based on how well it fulfills these criteria. For language education graduates, this might include considering factors like the school's academic reputation, the opportunity to teach advanced courses, and the availability of resources for professional development.

Beyond the numbers, it is essential to consider the company culture, growth potential, and work-life balance of each potential employer. Seeking additional information by asking questions during interviews and talking to current employees can provide valuable insights. Language education graduates can inquire about the school's teaching philosophy, the level of support provided to teachers and the opportunities for curriculum innovation.

Trusting your gut feeling and considering the overall fit with the company and team is also important. Once a preferred offer is chosen, graduates should negotiate salary and benefits and communicate clearly and professionally with employers when accepting or declining offers.

Conclusion

Navigating career transitions is a complex but crucial step for graduates as they move from academia to the professional world. It requires a multifaceted approach to achieve success. This paper has provided insights and recommendations to help language education graduates in Nigeria navigate this transition effectively.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby put forth by this paper based on the issues raised herein.

1. Language education undergraduates should be adequately made aware by their trainers regarding the hurdles Nigerian graduates have to surmount as they transit from trainees to professionals.

2. These undergrads should as well be made sufficiently aware of the myriad of opportunities that abound to those among them who are equipped with the required skills necessary for survival in the 21st century Nigerian labour market.
3. The curricular for language teacher education should emphasize such self-employability skills as tutoring, freelancing, and publishing, among others.
4. Opportunities for free short online courses should be made available to language teacher trainees and graduates with a view to making them up to date on necessary skills they need to compete with peers in a globalized world of speedy disruptive developments.

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