CURRICULUM INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING TO ADDRESS GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS MISMATCH IN NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS

Hamzat Atuunise SHITTU
Department of Curriculum. & Instructions,
Federal College of Education, Iwo, Osun State
shittuhamzat@gmail.com
&
ENIOLA, Lateefat Motunrayo
Department of Educational Psychology & Counselling,
Federal College of Education, Iwo, Osun State
eniolamotunrayolateefat@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Although access to higher education institutions in Nigeria continues to expand, many graduates remain inadequately prepared for the labour market due to deficiencies in employability skills, thereby increasing the unemployment rate. This conceptual paper argues that graduate unemployment in Nigeria is not solely a function of an oversupplied labour market but is substantially a problem of skills mismatch, in which curricula emphasize content mastery while neglecting Social Emotional Learning competencies that employers cherish alongside technical knowledge. Drawing on Vygotsky's social development theory, Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, the paper builds a conceptual case for integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curricula of Nigerian higher education institutions. Adopting a desk-based, narrative-conceptual methodology, the paper proposes a curriculum-integration model spanning course-embedded instruction, experiential and work-integrated learning, campus climate, staff development, and structured guidance and counselling services. It also presents guidance counsellors as the professional group to coordinate SEL delivery, assess students' social-emotional competencies, also labour-market expectations. The paper concludes with recommendations for embedding SEL and strengthening guidance and counselling units as a joint strategy for reducing graduate unemployment and skills mismatch in Nigeria.

Keywords: Curriculum Integration, Social-emotional learning (SEL), Nigerian Tertiary Education, Graduate Employability, Guidance and Counselling

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, there has been an expansion in the establishment of Nigerian tertiary institutions and the introduction of new policies on education for maximum access to education and graduate employability. As graduates of these institutions are multiplying, employers are increasingly seeking graduates of not only disciplinary knowledge and technical competence, but also of transferable skills like communication, collaboration, critical thinking, adaptability, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skill, self-directed learning, teamwork, and problem-solving, ethical decision-making, resilience, and leadership, describing graduates of these institutions as certificated but not job ready because they lack those competencies (Aselebe, 2022). As a result, Nigeria's tertiary educational regulatory agencies introduced reforms to enhance the

quality and relevance of tertiary education. The reforms include the introduction of entrepreneurship education and the establishment of Entrepreneurial Studies and Career Advisory Centres in tertiary institutions to promote self-reliance and reduce graduates' dependence on white-collar employment (National Universities Commission, 2004). Even with these attempts, concerns regarding the extent to which tertiary institutions adequately prepare students for contemporary labour market realities persist (Terhemen, 2023).

These skills are not narrowly technical competencies; they are, almost without exception, the same competencies that social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks describe as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). This convergence suggests that Nigerian higher education institutions (HEIs) are contending with a curriculum design problem as much as an economic one, and that a curriculum historically organized around content transmission has left affective and interpersonal development to chance.

SEL has, over the past three decades, moved from the margins of early childhood and basic education discourse into a recognized lever for developing the whole learner, including in postsecondary and workforce-preparation contexts. Yet in Nigeria, SEL remains overwhelmingly associated with pre-primary and primary schooling, and is rarely discussed as a deliberate feature of higher education institutions' curricula. At the same time, guidance and counselling units exist, at least on paper, in most Nigerian tertiary institutions, with a mandate that already spans educational, vocational, and personal-social development. This paper argues that these two under-utilized assets - SEL as a curriculum philosophy and guidance and counselling as an institutional structure - can be deliberately joined to respond to graduate unemployment and skills mismatch.

This paper examines and synthesizes theoretical and empirical literature on SEL, graduate employability, and guidance and counselling practice in Nigeria to build an argument and a curriculum-integration framework, and to draw out implications for the practice of guidance and counselling in tertiary institutions.

Background of the Problem

In Nigeria, there is increased access to higher education institutions, but after graduation, getting employment becomes difficult. One of the reasons behind this is traced to employers' reports on graduates' weaknesses in communication, teamwork, initiative, and problem-solving, even with their relevant academic qualifications (Hendarman & Cantner, 2018). These competencies are components of SEL framework.

Another problem is the employability challenge, which occurs when graduates lack adaptation, collaboration, and communication skills and cannot manage themselves effectively; they remain disadvantaged in a competitive labour market, lacking SEL competencies (Terhemen, 2023). Another dimension of the problem is the underutilization of guidance and counselling services in addressing career preparedness (Samudra & Wangid, 2024). Although counselling units exist in many institutions, they are frequently limited to crisis management or registration-related issues rather than proactive employability development.

The paper, in response to these three problems, therefore, examines how SEL-infused curriculum reform can work with guidance and counselling to improve graduate outcomes.

Objectives

Generally, this paper discusses the infusion of social-emotional learning into the curriculum as a strategic response to graduate unemployment and skills mismatch in Nigerian higher education. It also highlights the implications of this approach for guidance and counselling practice. It shows that the unemployment problem is not limited to a labour-market issue but also curricular and student-development issues. Specifically, the paper set out to:

1. Examine the theoretical basis for embedding SEL in higher-education curricula;
2. Analyse the relationship between graduate unemployment, skills mismatch, and the social-emotional competency gaps reported in the Nigerian employability literature;
3. Propose a conceptual model for integrating SEL into the curricula of Nigerian higher education institutions; and
4. Articulate the implications of this integration for the roles, training, and positioning of guidance and counselling personnel in Nigerian tertiary institutions.—

This adopts a secondary research methodology. This kind of research uses data gathered from published peer-reviewed papers, meta-analyses, or government or private databases (George, 2024). This method is often inexpensive or free to access, and it can theoretically be exploratory or explanatory. It uses secondary materials collected, collated, and easily accessible. This paper is guided by the philosophical and theoretical frameworks like Vygotsky's social development theory, Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. Thus, it is a conceptual/desk-review paper, and its methodology is accordingly a narrative synthesis study. The method is chosen in this academic paper because the needed materials abound and are within reach on the internet, in libraries, and in private collections. Above all, this method is cheaper to adopt.

Conceptual Clarification

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

One of the approaches in education is social -emotional learning (SEL). It enhances social – emotional development (SED) and social-emotional growth. It is the process by which individuals acquire and apply emotional and social competencies that enable them to manage emotions, achieve goals, demonstrate empathy, build relationships, and make responsible decisions (Norris Haynes, 2025). In higher education, SEL provides a framework for developing the human and interpersonal dimensions of graduate competence. It recognizes that a graduate may possess excellent technical knowledge but experience difficulty in applying it in a workplace if communication, collaboration, adaptability or self-management competencies are weak. Thus, these competencies should be seen as a complement to academic and occupational skills.

Graduate Unemployment

Globally, the upshot of graduate unemployment has become a widespread concern. Graduate unemployment is the number or proportion of degree holders (graduate and postgraduate) in a given economy who are capable and willing to work but unable to find jobs (Oppong & Sachs, 2015). In the Nigerian context, this is exacerbated by underemployment, in which graduates work in roles unrelated to, or below the level of, their qualifications.

Skills Mismatch

Skills mismatch, on the other hand, is the disconnection between the abilities that workers hold and those demanded by their occupations (Faustino, Gabasa & De Jesus, 2025). In Nigeria, this is relevant in three forms: field-of-study mismatch (horizontal mismatch), where graduates are trained in disciplines the economy does not need in the volume produced; vertical mismatch (qualification mismatch), where graduates are over or under-qualified for the roles available to them; and skills-gap mismatch (qualitative mismatch), where graduates possess the formal qualification but lack the practical, technical, or interpersonal competencies required by employers (McGuinness, Pouliakas & Redmond, 2018). This paper argues most directly for the third form through SEL-informed curriculum reform.

Graduate Unemployment and Skills Mismatch in the Nigerian Higher Education Context

Nigeria's tertiary institutions produce large numbers of graduates, outstripping formal-sector job creation. This, according to ILO. (2024) analysis, is linked to 'jobless economic growth,' in which the economy expands without generating employment at a pace matching the annual output of graduates, compounding the disconnection between academic programmes and labour-market realities. According to the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (2024), the Nigerian economy recorded an increase in the unemployment rate to 5.3 percent in the first quarter of 2024 from 5.0 percent in the third quarter of 2023. This represents the third consecutive rise in the rate of unemployment since the second quarter of 2023.

The labour market cannot absorb all graduates at the pace they are produced, and employers report that many graduates are not adequately prepared for available roles due to missing attributes like communication, critical thinking, decision-making, interpersonal skills, self-directed learning, teamwork and problem-solving alongside more narrowly technical or digital competencies (Okolie et al., 2019). These deficiencies indicate that the problem is not a simple lack of intelligence or diligence but a lack of deliberate exposure to, and practice in, the affective and interpersonal domains that SEL frameworks describe. Alongside technical and digital literacy, employers increasingly prize resilience, adaptability, creative thinking, and lifelong learning — attributes that align closely with the self-management and motivation components of Goleman's model.

Nigerian policy and scholarly responses to this problem have tended to concentrate on curriculum-content reform, industry–institution collaboration, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and entrepreneurship education. But it is pertinent to note that a graduate may complete an entrepreneurship module and still not possess the capacities that SEL is designed to build. This paper therefore positions SEL curriculum integration not as a replacement for TVET, entrepreneurship education, or industry partnership, but as the connective tissue that allows technical and vocational reforms to translate into genuine employability.

Theoretical Framework of SEL

1. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

Vygotsky's theory is one of the useful theoretical foundations for understanding SEL. It suggests that social interactions largely determine human development, and these mediate cognitive and emotional development. It holds that there is a limit to what a learner is capable of learning alone and that pivotal knowledge and development are gained in a group setting (Chatterjee Singh & Duraiappah, 2020). This is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

This theory is relevant to higher education because the ZPD suggests that undergraduates develop competencies through interaction with lecturers, peers, mentors, and wider communities. From a curriculum perspective, therefore, SEL should not be limited to individual reflection. Students should have opportunities to practise social-emotional competencies through authentic social learning experiences. Higher institutions can create learning environments in which students progressively develop competence through interaction with more experienced lecturers, peers and professionals.

Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory

Daniel Goleman made the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) widely known and believed it could be more significant than conventional IQ in predicting personal and professional achievement (Todorova, 2024). This theory is very significant to SEL as it encompasses five key components as central dimensions of emotional intelligence (EI):

i. Self-awareness- The capacity to know and comprehend one's feelings, including their influence on behaviour and relations.
ii. Self-regulation- The correct regulation and expression of feelings, adapting to change, and taking responsibility for behaviour.
iii. Social skills- This component is needed to communicate and interact efficiently and in a socially adept manner with others, including active listening, leadership, and nonverbal communication
iv. Empathy- The ability to read others' feelings and act appropriately, particularly in intricate social situations and in situations involving relations of power.
v. Motivation- Specifically, intrinsic motivation is based on self-determined goals and personal satisfaction, not external outcomes, to initiate goal-setting, accomplishment, and initiative.

Each EI component leads to a person's ability to navigate social interactions, control feelings, and pursue self-directed learning and development. Hence, they are foundational to the acquisition of SEL competencies and directly relevant to the graduate-employability debate.

The CASEL Framework

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) organizes SEL into five core competencies: self- awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Although this framework was primarily developed for Basic Education, its competencies map with notable precision onto the attributes Nigerian employers say graduates lack: self-management corresponds to self -directed learning and work discipline; social awareness and relationship skills correspond to interpersonal and communication competence; responsible decision-making corresponds to ethical judgement in the workplace. This alignment is the conceptual hinge of the present paper. It suggests that the CASEL competency architecture, ordinarily discussed in early years and primary contexts, can be repurposed as an employability framework for Nigerian higher education.

Human Capital and Employability Theory

Human capital theory considers education as an investment that enhances an individual's productive capacity and increases their value in the labour market. Contemporary employability theory has extended this view beyond technical qualifications to include 'soft' or generic attributes, self-management, communication, teamwork, and adaptability, that determine whether

a credential can actually be converted into a job. Following the SEL theory, employability theory supplies the labour-market rationale for curriculum change, while Vygotsky, Goleman, and CASEL supply the developmental and pedagogical rationale. Together they justify treating SEL not as a peripheral wellbeing initiative but as a core employability strategy.

Rationale for SEL Integration in Nigerian Higher Institutions

Several arguments that support the deliberate integration of SEL into Nigerian tertiary curricula include:

1. The competency alignment demonstrated above means that SEL integration directly targets the specific deficiencies employers report, rather than adding generic content; 2. SEL has been associated with improved academic engagement, stronger self-regulation, reduced behavioural difficulty, and better long-term mental-health and social outcomes (Dunbuya, 2023);
3. Nigerian higher education already possesses a structure- a guidance and counselling unit- with an explicit mandate to support students, so SEL integration does not require inventing a new bureaucratic structure; it requires re-equipping and repositioning an existing one.
4. The affective and mental-health toll of prolonged job searching, economic precarity, and the wider stressors of Nigerian undergraduate life make emotional regulation and resilience-building a student-wellbeing imperative in its own right, independent of labour-market payoff.

A Conceptual Model for Curriculum Integration of SEL in Nigerian Higher Institutions

Drawing on established strategies for SEL integration in basic education and adapting them to the structural features of Nigerian higher education institutions, this paper proposes a four-strand model.

1. Course-Embedded Integration: SEL competencies can be embedded within existing academic subjects such as General Studies (GST) courses, seminars, project supervision, and group assignments rather than taught as a stand-alone course competing for scarce curriculum hours.
2. Experiential and Work-Integrated Learning: Industrial training (SIWES), internships, entrepreneurship incubation, and community-service schemes already place Nigerian students in real workplace and community settings. These placements can be deliberately reframed as SEL laboratories for developing SEL skills.
3. Campus Climate and Co-Curricular Structures: Students' unions, hostels, mentoring schemes, clubs, and orientation programmes should be improved to support relationship-building and emotional adjustment.
4. Staff Development and Guidance-Counsellor-Led Coordination: Guidance and counselling units should coordinate the entire process by training staff, assessing student development, and offering support where necessary.

Implications for Guidance and Counselling

The centrality of guidance and counselling to this model is deliberate and follows directly from the existing mandate and documented limitations of the profession in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Studies (David, Ohunene & Jacob, 2021; Samudra & Wangid, 2024) maintained that guidiance counselors must possess the following if they are to function very well.

1. Plan Expanded and More Central Institutional Role: Guidance and counselling in Nigerian higher institutions should move from a mainly reactive role to a proactive one, where they can help design learning experiences, train lecturers, and assess social- emotional outcomes.
2. Process new Competencies: For guidance counsellors to lead SEL integration credibly, their own training needs to extend beyond traditional test-and-tell career guidance and crisis counselling to include SEL pedagogy, assessment, group facilitation, and collaboration with academic departments.
3. Reposition career Guidance as Social-Emotional Preparation: SEL-informed career guidance would additionally focus on interview-related emotional regulation, resilience in the face of job-search setbacks, self-awareness of strengths and values in career decision-making, and interpersonal-skill rehearsal through mock interviews, group career-simulation exercises, and structured feedback.

Structural and Resourcing Implications

Realizing this expanded role requires addressing the well-documented structural weaknesses of guidance and counselling in Nigeria: inadequate funding, shortage of trained and professionally certified counsellors, poor infrastructural provision, and the marginal status of counselling units within institutional decision-making (David, Ohunene, & Jacob, 2021). If counsellors are to coordinate an institution-wide SEL strategy, guidance and counselling can no longer be treated as an optional, thinly staffed unit; it requires dedicated budget lines, adequate staff-to-student ratios, physical space suited to both individual and group work, and formal representation in curriculum-planning and quality-assurance committees.

Assessment and Data Implications

A SEL-integrated curriculum requires some means of tracking whether social-emotional competencies are actually developing, both to guide practice and to demonstrate value to institutional leadership and funders. Counsellors are well placed to lead the adaptation or development of context-appropriate instruments for assessing SEL competencies among Nigerian undergraduates, and to use this data to refine curriculum design over time.

Challenges to Implementation of SEL Curriculum in Nigerian Higher Institutions.

Several challenges are likely to constrain SEL curriculum integration in Nigerian higher institutions. These include:

1. Poor funding: many institutions already struggle to fund basic instructional infrastructure, let alone new curriculum initiatives.
2. Shortage of trained personnel: few Nigerian lecturers have been trained in SEL-responsive pedagogy, and guidance and counselling units are frequently understaffed.
3. Curriculum rigidity and an examination-driven culture: since SEL competencies are process-oriented and difficult to capture within conventional.
4. Cultural and contextual fit is a further consideration: SEL frameworks developed largely in North American and European contexts must be adapted to Nigerian culture.
5. Finally, the low institutional status of guidance and counselling units: frequently under-represented in curriculum and policy decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Based on the arguments of this paper, it is concluded that:

1. Graduate unemployment in Nigeria is not only an economic or curriculum problem but also a social-emotional problem;
2. Deliberate integration of SEL into the curricula of Nigerian higher education institutions is a practical way to improve employability, well-being, and resilience among students;
3. Guidance and counselling units should become the main coordinators of this change, but only if they are properly supported and strengthened.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the model and challenges outlined above, the paper offers the following recommendations:

1. Regulatory bodies should formally recognize social-emotional and employability competencies within curriculum benchmark documents.
2. Institutions should invest in structured professional development that equips both academic staff and guidance counsellors with SEL-responsive pedagogy.
3. Guidance and counselling units should be strengthened structurally so that they can credibly assume a coordinating role in institution-wide SEL delivery.
4. Curriculum designers should embed SEL competencies within existing General Studies courses, project supervision, and industrial-attachment frameworks.
5. Institutions should develop or adapt simple, context-appropriate instruments for tracking students' social-emotional competency development over the course of study.
6. Finally, further empirical research is needed to test and refine the conceptual model advanced in this paper within the Nigerian context.

REFERENCES

Aselebe, K. (2022). Higher education and graduates' unemployability in Nigeria: The policy implication. *Proceedings of the European Conference on Education. IAFOR*.

Chatterjee Singh, N., & Duraiappah, A. (2020). Rethinking learning: A review of social and emotional learning for education systems. UNESCO MGIEP.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2020). CASEL's SEL framework: What are the core competence areas and where are they promoted? Author. *Retrieved from:* https://casel.org

David, O. K., Ohunene, L. A., & Jacob, O. N. (2021). Guidance and counselling services in Nigerian tertiary institutions: Problems and solutions. *International Journal of Education and Educational Research*, *1(1)*, 8–9.

Dumbuya, E. (2023). Integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into curriculum development: A Pathway to holistic education. *Available at SSRN 5019755*. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5019755

Faustino, Gabasa & De Jesus (2025). Systematic literature review on skill mismatch: bridging the gap through educational leadership and industry collaboration. *International journal of research and innovation in social science* (IJRISS)**.** DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.905000400

George, T. (2024). *Research methods in social sciences*. Academic Press, 156–178.

Hendarman, A. F., & Cantner, U. (2018a). Soft skills, hard skills, and individual innovativeness. *Eurasian Business Review*, 8(2), 139–169. *Retrieved from:* https://doi.org/10.1007/s40821-017-0076-6

International Labour Organisation (2024). *Unemployment with advanced education*. ILO.

McGuinness, S., Pouliakas, K., & Redmond, P. (2018). Skills mismatch: Concepts, measurement and policy approaches. *IZA Journal of Labor Policy*, 7(1), 9. *Retrieved from:* https://doi.org/10.2478/izajolp-2018-0009

National Universities Commission. (2004). Labour market expectations of Nigerian graduates. NUC.

Norris Haynes, M. (2025). Social and emotional learning (SEL) as a grounded theory of human learning. *Retrieved from:* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/ 388564596_Social and_Emotional_Learning_SEL_as_a_Grounded_Theory_ of_Human_ Learning.

Okolie, U. C., Igwe, P. A., Eneje, B. C., Nwosu, H., & Mlanga, S. (2019). Enhancing graduate employability: Why do higher education institutions have problems with teaching generic skills? *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*.

Oppong, S. & Sachs, S. (2015). Managing graduate unemployment in emerging economies critical analysis of the skill mismatch and over supply theses. *JEL poslovnaizvrsnost Zagreb, God, ix, 1. JEL classification,* May, 125-135.

Samudra, R. & Wangid, M. N. (2024). The role of guidance and counseling in strengthening students' career preparation. *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan*. *16, (2).* 2148-2160. ISSN: 2087-9490 EISSN: 2597-940X, DOI: 10.35445/alishlah.v16i2.4980

Terhemen, A. (2023) Reducing graduate unemployment: The role of employability skills training. MERL Articles. *Retrieved from:* https://leapafrica.org/reducing-graduate-unemployment-the-role-of-employability-skills-training/

The Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG) (2024). *Unemployment alert*

Todorova, A. (2024). Examining emotional intelligence evolution with age: Insights from Bulgarian digital entrepreneurs of different generations, I*IMT Journal of Management, 1, (1)* 5-23. *Retrieved from:* https://doi.org/10.1108/IIMTJM-12-2023-0075