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Skill possession and prospective university students' career decisions: Does prior exposure really matter?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of students' skills in their career decisions while preparing for university education. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The study's population comprised 5,656 Senior Secondary class three (SS III) students distributed across 101 public secondary schools in Ikom Education Zone, Cross River State. A sample of 1,135 SS III students was selected (representing 20% of the population) using the simple random sampling technique. "Skills and Career Choice Checklist (SCCC)," designed by the researchers, was the instrument used for data collection. Frequency counts, percentages, and the Chi-square test of independence were used for data analysis. Findings revealed that many prospective university students had exposure to different skills. The career decisions of prospective students varied according to their skill sets. It was established that the extent to which students' career choices depend on their exposure to skills is significant. It was concluded that prior exposure to skills determines prospective university students' career choices. This study has counselling implications for the proper guidance of students seeking to make career decisions. Career counsellors can use the results of this study to guide students in taking courses related to their skills or the other way around.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the influence of students' skills on their career decisions. It emphasizes the importance of considering skills for making informed choices and aligning careers with existing knowledge. It shows how prospective university students can use exposure to skills to determine their career choices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Skills refer to personal, vocational or professional abilities possessed by individuals that are either inborn or learned through full or part-time training. These skills could be used for a living, entertainment, education or leisure and can be learned in school, before or after school. They can also be acquired through part-time employment, practical school lessons, volunteer work, and family engagement (Wamala, Tagoole, & Omala, 2013). Previous research has indicated that individuals' skills are connected to entrepreneurial, work, or job competence

(Baglama & Uzunboylu, 2017; Fatin & Salim, 2020; Isah & Hashim, 2018; Jackson, 2015; Khuyen, Thanh, Tan, & Ghi, 2023; Mustapha, 2017; Ogunleye, 2014; Shwedeh et al., 2023). In fact, Oluwale, Jegede, and Olamade (2013) reported that it is easier for people who had earlier gained craft and trade skills to erode in the business than those without such experiences. Furthermore, Jackson (2015) revealed that skill possession has a fourfold effect on a person's career choice status: providing professional networking opportunities and expanding career options, providing information and insights into a person's desired occupation, and aiding career decision-making. Similarly, it has been reported that previous skills boost the career options of individuals, allowing them to contribute to national growth (Ogunleye, 2014). Despite the importance of skills in individuals' career choices, previous research has paid little attention to the role that prior skill possession plays in students' career decisions. Before university admission, students can gain prior skills through high school education, extracurricular activities, internships, online courses, volunteering, vocational training, certifications, personal projects, mentorships, and independent research (Odigwe, Offem, & Owan, 2018; Owan, Ekpenyong, Owan, Owan, & Ekereke, 2023; Petters, Ekpenyong, Owan, Asuquo, & Asuquo, 2023). These avenues provide opportunities to develop academic knowledge, practical expertise, soft skills, and industry-specific competencies, enabling students to make informed career choices and enhance their employability in the future. Individuals have opportunities to acquire various skills throughout life. Some skills, like singing, cooking, and drawing, may develop naturally from an early age or be learned at home. The high school offers exposure to skills like sewing, computer operation, farming, dancing, computer repairs, marketing, and arts and graphics design. Apprenticeships and observation enable learning in acting, hairdressing, driving, phone repairs, electrical installation and management, fishing, soap making, and shoe making. Moreover, through online learning and apprenticeship, individuals may explore skills like carpentry and furniture making, baking, welding, beads making, barbing, paint making, satellite dish installation, cosmetology, and video coverage. However, certain skills, like becoming a chemist or blacksmith, require specialized education beyond these means. Nevertheless, in the context of Nigeria, many individuals learn how to sell medications, blacksmithing, building, or other complex skills through several years or practical training as apprentice, working under certified or licensed individuals. Due to the poor quality of formal practical training offered in many schools in Nigeria, the apprenticeship system offers a better platform for students to acquire practical knowledge in almost any field, whereas theoretical knowledge can be gained from schools.

Different studies in Nigeria and other countries in Africa has affirmed to the effectiveness of the apprenticeship system in skill acquisition for further education or a useful in society (e.g., (Daniel, Oshodi, Gyoh, & Chinyio, 2020; Henry & Lloyd, 2019; Magidi & Mahiya, 2021; Muchira, Kiroro, Mutisya, Ochieng, & Ngware, 2022; Oviawe, Uwameiye, & Uddin, 2017)), especially as the formal curriculum has failed in inculcating these skills at all education levels (Arop, Ekpang, Nwannunu, & Owan, 2018; Odigwe et al., 2018; Owan, Agurokpon, & Udida, 2021; Owan et al., 2022). Students may be drawn to apprenticeships for various reasons, driven by the popularity and demand for certain skills, societal shifts, income prospects, and personal passions. Previous studies have shown that variables such as parental value, career prestige, societal ratings, and economic viability are important in students career choices (Ajzenman et al., 2021; Hassan, Shahzad, & Waqar, 2020; Phillips, Wilbanks, Rodriguez-Salinas, & Doberneck, 2019; Umoh, 2021; Wadlewski, 2022). Therefore, students' engagement in apprenticeships provide students with hands-on training and real-world experience, equipping them with valuable skills to pursue successful careers and achieve their aspirations. More specifically, studies in the last decade (e.g., (Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Jon, Shin, & Fry, 2020; Lee, Lee, Dopson, & Yoon, 2020; Özlen & Arnaut, 2013; Parkinson & Mackay, 2016)) have based their interest on career choices, career decisions, course satisfaction and course effectiveness among undergraduate students and university graduates with little or no attention to prospective university students. Prospective students are individuals considering applying to a university, while university students have successfully enrolled and are actively pursuing their chosen academic programs. Prospective students are in the planning and decision-making phase, gathering information about universities and courses. Students who have taken university entrance examinations but are yet to be handed formal admission letters by their chosen

universities are considered prospective, in the context of this study. On the other hand, university students are fully immersed in the academic environment, attending classes, engaging in extracurricular activities, and working towards obtaining a degree or certification. The underrepresentation of prospective university students in the literature (on career choice) creates a population gap that should be addressed. It is important to consider prospective students rather than university students or graduates because they need proper guidance since they are on the verge of securing admission to higher education. Unlike the undergraduates already in school, timely actions can be taken to correct and remediate prospective university students' poor career decisions. To buttress this point, a study by Jain (2017) showed that graduates whom career counsellors guided during their career selection were more satisfied with their careers. Similarly, a statistically significant association between early decision-making and expected outcomes has been established (Baglama & Uzunboylu, 2017).

Some scholars have argued that counselling, awareness and conflicts influence students' career choices (e.g., (Idowu, Ifedayo, & Idowu, 2020; Jain, 2017; Kindo & Astalin, 2020; Lau, Anctil, Ee, Jaafar, & Kin, 2020; Suryadi, Sawitri, Hayat, & Putra, 2020)). For example, Suryadi et al. (2020) indicated that counsellors' involvement and the congruence of adolescent-parent careers had a favorable and substantial impact on students' career choices. The findings of Fatin and Salim (2020) also indicated that students exposed to vocational skills have more confidence in making career decisions. Similarly, a significant favorable influence of prior competencies on entrepreneurial career options has been documented (Isah & Hashim, 2018). However, these studies did not show how skill possession influenced students' career decisions among prospective university students. Instead, most previous studies have been concerned with identifying the factors responsible for or contributing to students' career choices (e.g., (Kaneez & Medha, 2018; Marinas, Igret, Marinas, & Prioteasa, 2016; Querido, van Den Broek, De Rond, Wigersma, & Ten Cate, 2018; Almon Shumba & Naong, 2012; Zhou & Xu, 2013)). It has been documented that factors that are very critical in influencing students' career decisions include family income (Shumba & Naong, 2013) self-concept (Choy & Yeung, 2022) teachers and peer groups (Tey, Moses, & Cheah, 2020) parents (Alboliteeh et al., 2022) ethnicity (Wahid, Suhairom, Zulkifli, & Nasir, 2018) and the environment (Aggarwal & Shrivastava, 2021; Iqbal'Imari, 2021). Although different factors have been revealed in the literature as predictors of students' career choices, only a handful of studies have considered the role students' previously-mastered skills play in their career decisions. It is worth reiterating that many high schools' graduates have acquired certain skills through their in-born talents, apprenticeship, informal trainings, secondary school courses, vocational ventures, the activities of their parents, cocurricular activities and the list goes on. Consequently, several questions are begging for answers, such as: Do students make career choices in areas closely related to the skills they possess? If so, to what extent do students choose courses based on their previously-possessed skills? How do these choices, in turn, affect their career success later in life? These and many other related questions currently remain unanswered, prompting the need for further studies in such an important research area.

A study by Hall et al. (2021) attempted to answer some questions. The study identified mentorship and clinical practice as pivotal determinants of students' choice to study physiotherapy. Even though the implications of the cited study are very clear, more than one study is needed to address the concerns. Consequently, the current study was conceived given the above questions and only claimed to provide definitive answers to some. However, this study was conducted to answer some of the questions raised and plug the knowledge gap existing in the literature by determining whether students' skill possession is associated with their career decisions.

In this study's context, career decisions refer to the process where students choose which career to follow among competing alternatives. This might be challenging if the students are not adequately guided in choosing their respective fields of study (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017). It has been reported that the secret to students thriving in highly competitive graduate labour markets is to make early career decisions (Jackson & Wilton, 2017). Therefore, proper career guidance may lead to better career choices, reducing frustration and unemployment among graduates. For example, studies have shown that students' career choices are connected to their employability (Fini, Meoli, & Sobrero, 2022; Hall et al., 2021). The connection between career decisions and employment prospects is mediated by

interest and skill acquisition (Odigwe et al., 2018). This implies that students who pursue careers based on their interests may be more resilient in acquiring the needed skills for effective functioning, thereby making them more appealing to employers (Gar & Rodgers, 2020; Innocent, 2014; Nyong, 2013).

Despite the importance of making career decisions, ample evidence suggests that most students are forced to choose careers based on the interest of parents, guardians, role models, siblings, and others. For example, studies have shown that most parents determine the career paths of their children (Halim, Abd Rahman, Zamri, & Mohtar, 2018; Lee, Lee, & Dopson, 2019; Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014). Others have highlighted the role of gender, interest, goals, actions (Turner, Joeng, Sims, Dade, & Reid, 2019) peers (Meoli, Fini, Sobrero, & Wiklund, 2020; Rosenqvist, 2018) print media, finance, job opportunities (Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Özlen & Arnaut, 2013) parents' occupation (Chi, Wang, Liu, & Zhu, 2017) and professional counsellors (Kuijpers, 2019; Parikh-Foxx, Martinez, Baker, & Olsen, 2020) in students' career decisions. Furthermore, institutional imposition has been found as another critical source of students' career decisions (Meoli et al., 2020). Institutional imposition occurs when universities outrightly admit students into courses other than their main choices (Arop et al., 2018; Bassey, Owan, & Agunwa, 2019). The practice has led some students to careers they regret after university studies (Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014). This literature review indicates that little attention has been paid to the contributions of students' skills to their decisions to follow specific career paths, especially as they make course choices. Thus, little is known regarding the link between students' pre-exposure to skills and their career decisions. Furthermore, prospective university students are an underrepresented population in the literature, yet this population should receive the most substantial attention. Based on these reasons, this study was undertaken to determine whether exposure to skills matters in prospective university students' career decisions.

This study is grounded in the social learning theory (Bandura, 1969, 1985), which emphasizes that individuals' learning and behaviour are influenced by their immediate surroundings and internal processes. According to this theory, learning is a social process in which individuals actively acquire, create, and organize knowledge through self-initiation and control (Yu, Tian, Vogel, & Kwok, 2010). The theory recognizes that individuals' cognition and behaviour are shaped by observing and interacting with peers and contextual factors, such as environmental norms, cultures, and policies (Ainin, Naqshbandi, Moghavvemi, & Jaafar, 2015). This theory is relevant to the current study because most students choose careers based on social norms, values and prestige accorded to different professions. Furthermore, some skills students possess are a product of learning through observation as they watch people perform such actions. Students could, therefore, make career decisions that are socially dependent on the views of their peers, parents, siblings or societal values. Such choices may go a long way to deciding their level of functionality and performance in such courses.

1.1. Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the study:

i. What are the skills possessed by prospective university students?
ii. What are the career choices of prospective university students?
iii. To what extent do the career choices of prospective university students depend on their skill possession?

2. METHODS

This study utilized a descriptive survey research design. The population for this study consisted of 5,656 Senior Secondary class three (SS III) students enrolled in 101 public secondary schools in Ikom Education Zone, Cross River State. To determine the required sample size, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*power software (Erdfelder, Faul, Buchner, & Lang, 2009; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). This analysis aimed to ascertain the sample size needed for the Chi-square test of independence, with 1080 degrees of freedom, to achieve a statistical power of 95% at the .05 level, assuming an effect size of w = 0.50.

The power analysis results indicated that a minimum sample size of 655 respondents would be sufficient to achieve the desired statistical power (see Figure 1). However, due to the large population size and the importance of obtaining a representative sample, 20% of the population was selected. Consequently, a sample of 1,135 SS III students was chosen for this study. This sample size exceeded the minimum requirements for detecting a large effect size (w = 0.50). Thus, we can effectively reject the null hypothesis when it is false or accept it when it is true, based on the sample selected. Nevertheless, a simple random sampling technique was employed in selecting respondents. The distribution of the population and the sample for the study is presented in Table 1.

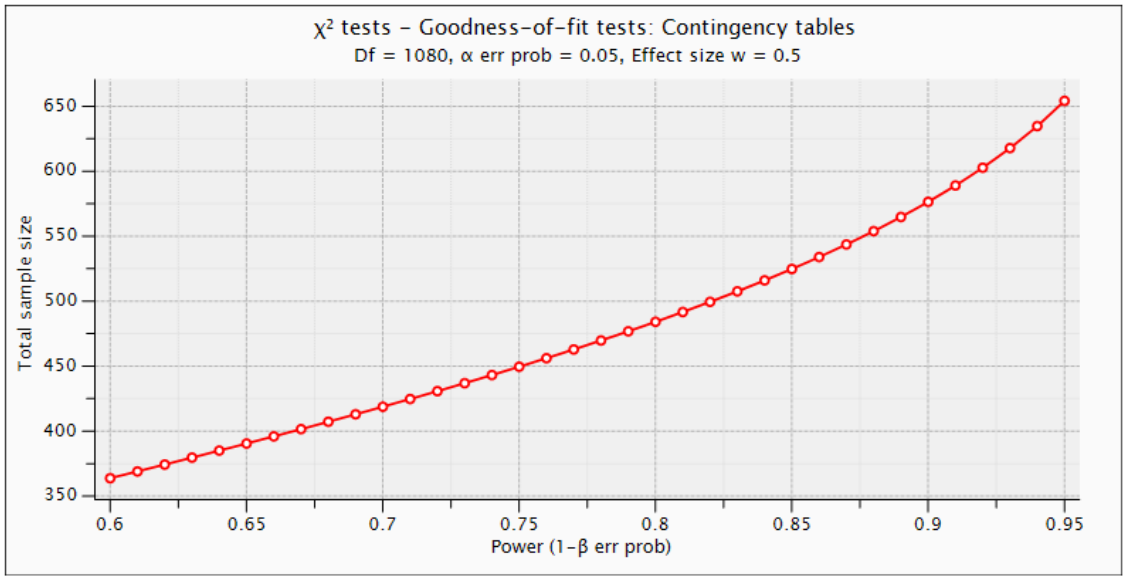

Figure 1. Power analysis for the minimally required sample size.

Table 1. Population and sample distribution of the study.

LGAs	No of schools	SS3 students	Sample
Abi	12	672	134
Boki	29	1624	325
Etung	11	616	123
Ikom	17	952	191
Obubra	16	913	183
Yakurr	16	896	179
Total	101	5673	1135

Note: SS3: Senior secondary class 3; LGAs: Local government areas.

The instrument used for data collection was the "Skills and Career Choice Checklist (SCCC)," designed by the researchers using extant literature. Since no previously validated instrument existed, this study found a need to develop a suitable instrument with good psychometric properties for data collection. We created and standardized the tool following the recommendations of various instrument validation studies (Bassey, Owan, Ikwen, & Amanso, 2020; Boateng, Neilands, Frongillo, Melgar-Quiñonez, & Young, 2018). The checklist had sections A, B, and C. Section A elicited information about respondents' personal information, such as age and gender. Sections B and C contained a non-exhaustive list of 25 common skills and career areas for respondents to tick the one(s) they possessed. Spaces were also provided for respondents to write down any skill they possess or career of interest that was not listed. Provisions were also made for respondents without any skill or career interest. Three psychometricians and four career counsellors made up the seven-member expert group that was consulted to judge the face and content validity of the instrument. All the individuals consulted for the validity test had over 15 years of practice experience in their respective fields. The experts considered the items developed to measure the variables and ensured that the item pools covered all the vital areas. Following the evaluators' advice, some items were dropped (due to their inapplicability), whereas others were revised for clarity. The quantitative approach to content

validity and inter-rater reliability approach was employed to determine the degree of universal agreement among the assessors in rating the relevance of each item in the checklist. The item content validity indices (I-CVIs) ranged from 0.85 to 0.99 for relevance. Given that seven experts were consulted, the expected minimum value of an I-CVI is 0.80 (Lawshe, 1975; Zamanzadeh et al., 2014). Therefore, there was 85 to 99% agreement among the assessors that items in the checklist were relevant in collecting data about the study variables. Furthermore, a focus group session was conducted where 15 prospective university students were invited to share their thoughts and opinions about the items in the instrument. They were also asked to provide an idea of any important missing items. Following their feedback, session attendees rated the survey well regarding the number of items, response time, and item clarity. To ensure the integrity of the study, several measures were taken to minimize bias and adhere to ethical standards. Before commencing data collection, thorough validation and control procedures were implemented. First, participation in the research was completely voluntary, and participants were free to decline or withdraw from the study at any point. Secondly, this research involved human participants, but following national regulations, ethical approval was not deemed necessary. Nonetheless, throughout the data collection phase, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Clear explanations were provided to the respondents, assuring them that their responses would be treated with confidentiality. Identifiable information was removed to safeguard privacy, and only aggregated data would be analyzed and reported. The data collected for this study were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and simple percentages. The Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to test the null hypothesis at the .05 significance level. These statistical procedures allowed for a comprehensive examination of the research objectives while maintaining a rigorous approach to data analysis.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Research Question 1

What are the skills possessed by prospective university students? This research was answered using the frequency distribution in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency distribution showing the number of students in possession of different skills.

SN	Skills possessed	F	%	SN	Skills possessed	F	%
1	Acting	31	2.7	17	Farming	58	5.1
2	Arts and graphics design	37	3.3	18	Fishing	20	1.8
3	Baking	77	6.8	19	Footballing	88	7.8
4	Barbing	16	1.4	20	Hairdressing	31	2.7
5	Beads making	17	1.5	21	Marketing	42	3.7
6	Blacksmithing	3	0.3	22	Mechanic	5	0.4
7	Carpentry and furniture making	36	3.2	23	Paint making	11	1
8	Chemist	9	0.8	24	Phone repairs	26	2.3
9	Computer operation/Manipulation	69	6.1	25	Satellite dish installation	10	0.9
10	Computer repairs	43	3.8	26	Sewing & fashion design	79	7
11	Cooking	83	7.3	27	Shoe making	38	3.3
12	Cosmetology	35	3.1	28	Singing	85	7.5
13	Dancing	55	4.8	29	Soap making	20	1.8
14	Drawing	35	3.1	30	Video coverage	8	0.7
15	Driving	29	2.6	31	Welding	19	1.7
16	Electrical installation/Management	20	1.8		Total	1135	100

Note: The skills were chosen based on a review of literature, expert suggestions and a focus group session with some students. They were also based on what is prevalent, relevant and obtainable in the study's context.

The result revealed a total of 31 unique skills that respondents already possess. Table 2 revealed that most respondents possessed footballing skills (N = 88, 7.8%). This is followed closely by Singing (N = 85, 7.5%), Cooking (N= 83, 7.3%), Sewing and Fashion design (N = 79, 7%), Baking (N = 77, 6.8%), Computer operation and manipulation (N = 69, 6.1%), Farming (N = 58, 5.1%), Dancing (N = 55, 4.8%), Computer Repairs (N = 43, 3.8%), Marketing (N = 42, 3.7%), Arts and Graphics Design (N = 37, 3.3%), Shoe Making (N = 38, 3.3%), Carpentry and

Furniture making (N= 36, 3.2%), Cosmetology (N = 35, 3.1%), Drawing (N = 35, 3.1%), Acting (N = 31, 2.7%), Hairdressing (N = 31, 2.7%), Driving (N = 29, 2.6%), Phone Repairs (N = 26, 2.3%), Electrical installation and management (N = 20, 1.8%), Fishing (N = 20, 1.8%), Soap making (N = 20, 1.8%), Welding (N = 19, 1.7%), Beads making (N = 17, 1.5%), Barbing (N = 16, 1.4%), Paint making (N = 11, 1%), Satellite dish installation (N = 10, 0.9%), Chemist (N = 9, 0.8%), Video coverage (N = 8, 0.7%), Mechanic (N = 5, 0.4%), and Blacksmithing (N = 3, 0.3%) in descending order.

3.2. Research Question 2

What are the career choices of prospective university students? The frequency distribution in Table 3 was used to answer this research question. As shown in Table 3, most students' interest was in venturing into the legal profession by becoming lawyers (N = 154, 13.6%). This is followed by those wishing to become medical doctors (N = 95, 8.4%), Musicians (N = 74, 6.5%), Engineers (N = 62, 5.5%), Computer Engineers (N = 55, 4.8%), Nurses (N = 52, 4.6%), Accountants (N = 47, 4.1%), Footballers (N = 45, 4%), Actors/Actresses (N = 40, 3.5%), Cosmetology (N =35, 3.1%), Electricians (N = 34, 3%), Computer Programmers (N = 33, 2.9%), Dancers (N = 33, 2.9%), Agriculturists (N = 32, 2.8%), Comedians (N = 32, 2.8%), Businesspeople (N= 29, 2.6%), Makeup Artists (N = 29, 2.6%), Pharmacists (N = 28, 2.5%) and Politicians (N = 28, 2.5%).

Others also indicated an interest in picking careers to become Architects (N = 26, 2.3%), Fashionistas (N = 20, 1.8%), Physicists (N = 19, 1.7), Military personnel (N = 19, 1.7%), Bankers (N = 18, 1.6%), Economists (N = 17, 1.5%), Marketers (N = 17, 1.5%) and Pilots (N = 16, 1.4%), Teachers (N = 10, 0.9%), Radiographers (N = 8, 0.7%), Surveyors (N = 6, 0.5%), Ambassador (N = 5, 0.4%), Microbiologists (N = 4, 0.4%), Researchers or Scientists (N = 5, 0.4%), Botanists (N = 3, 0.3%), Counsellors (N = 2, 0.2%) and Lecturers (N = 2, 0.2%). However, only one respondent indicated an interest in becoming a Referee (0.1%).

Table 3. Frequency distribution showing the number of prospective students and their career choices.

SN	Career interest	F	%	SN	Career interest	F	%
1	Accountant	47	4.1	20	Lawyer	154	13.6
2	Actor/Actress	40	3.5	21	Lecturer	2	0.2
3	Agriculturist	32	2.8	22	Makeup artist	29	2.6
4	Ambassador	5	0.4	23	Marketer	17	1.5
5	Architect	26	2.3	24	Medical doctor	95	8.4
6	Banker	18	1.6	25	Microbiologist	4	0.4
7	Botanist	3	0.3	26	Musician	74	6.5
8	Businessman/Woman	29	2.6	27	Nurse	52	4.6
9	Comedian	32	2.8	28	Pharmacist	28	2.5
10	Computer engineer	55	4.8	29	Physicist	19	1.7
11	Computer programmer	33	2.9	30	Pilot	16	1.4
12	Cosmetology	35	3.1	31	Politician	28	2.5
13	Counsellor	2	0.2	32	Radiographer	8	0.7
14	Dancer	33	2.9	33	Referee	1	0.1
15	Economist	17	1.5	34	Researcher/Scientist	5	0.4
16	Electrician	34	3	35	Soldier/Navy	19	1.7
17	Engineer	62	5.5	36	Surveyor	6	0.5
18	Fashionista	20	1.8	37	Teacher	10	0.9
19	Footballer	45	4		Total	1135	100

Note: The career choices were based on a review of literature, expert suggestions, and a focus group session with students. They were also based on what is prevalent, relevant and obtainable in the study's context.

3.3. Research Question 3

To what extent do the career choices of prospective university students depend on their skill possession? Using the frequency data in Table 2 and 3, a crosstab was created (see Appendix 1) to identify the number of students who indicated intentions to take up careers in areas related to their vocational skills or otherwise. A close examination of the results presented in the Appendix 1 shows that most students made choices related to their vocational skills.

However, some chose away from their areas of vocational skills. A chi-square test of independence was performed based on the crosstab in the Appendix 1 to determine how students' career intentions depended on their exposure to vocational skills. The analysis result (See Table 4) was statistically significant, χ^2 (1080) = 8041.515, p < .05, suggesting that students with specific skills chose career paths related to such skills.

Table 4. Chi-Square test of independence of the association between prospective university students' exposure to skills and their career choices.

Statistic	Value	Df	P-value
Pearson chi-square	8041.515[a]	1080	0.000
Likelihood ratio	3839.390	1080	0.000
N of valid cases	1135		

Note: a. 1124 cells (98.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is .00.

4. DISCUSSION

The result of the first research question discovered that prospective university students were exposed to various skills. However, the top ten skills mostly possessed by prospective university students included footballing, singing, cooking, sewing and fashion design, baking, computer operation and manipulation, farming, dancing, computer repairs and marketing skills. However, the top ten skills least possessed by prospective university students were blacksmithing, mechanic video coverage, chemist, satellite dish installation, paint making, barbing, beads making, welding, and soap making. An explanation for the high possession of the top ten skills might be their popularity, societal dynamics or income-generating potential and students' interests. This strengthens the evidence of previous research that interest, goals, and actions are crucial factors affecting students' career choices (Turner et al., 2019). Football, for instance, has, over the years, been an attractive profession due to its popularity and chances of making individuals famous and rich. This result aligns with Eremie (2014) findings that both male and female students choose careers based on the profession's prestige. The result further strengthens the findings of other studies (e.g., (Halim et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014)) that most parents determine the career paths of their children based on the social prestige attached to some professions. Besides, many students may have indicated that they possessed such skills because they engaged in them actively, not necessarily because they were exceptional in such skills. Cooking, baking, sewing and others are skills most students acquire from home through observation or training from their parents or siblings. This result supports the social learning theory (Bandura, 1969, 1985). According to the social learning theory, individuals learn new behaviors and skills by observing the actions and experiences of others in their social environment. Bandura argued that learning could occur through direct experiences, but it can also happen indirectly, such as by observing others and modeling their behavior. In the context of the result of this study, when students learn skills like cooking, baking and sewing from their parents or siblings, they engage in observational learning. By watching and imitating the actions of their family members, they acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to perform these tasks themselves. . The least possessed skills may have been due to their relatively new penetration into the Nigerian context, or the high cost associated with acquiring such skills.

The result of the second research question revealed that prospective university students have a wide range of career choices they are interested in pursuing. At the top of the list is the legal profession, medicine, music, civil engineering, computer engineering, nursing, accounting, footballing, acting and cosmetology. At the bottom of the list, students' career interests included teaching, radiography, surveying, ambassadors, microbiology, research, botany, counselling, lecturing and refereeing. The students may have chosen these careers due to their social prestige or value. In the Nigerian context, professions such as medicine, law, engineering and others are highly rated among parents and society as prestigious. The prestige attached to such courses is why most parents do not want their children to pursue certain professions whilst encouraging them or forcing them to pursue others (Akosah-Twumasi, Emeto, Lindsay, Tsey, & Malau-Aduli, 2018; LaRue, Daum, Mausch, & Harris, 2021; Obayelu & Fadele, 2019). This further corroborates the results of studies (such as Abrassart and Wolter (2020); Eremie (2014)

and Ule, Živoder, and Du Bois-Reymond (2015)) that students made choices based on parental influence and the professional prestige attached to different careers. Thus, most students believe that studying such courses would make them look attractive to employers and valued in society. Other careers, such as music, football, and acting, are all in the entertainment industry, with several celebrities serving as role models to students. Therefore, the attraction of students to these careers may be due to their desire to be like their models. This result aligns with the social learning theory (Bandura, 1969, 1985). Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes the role of observational learning and modeling in shaping individual behavior and career aspirations. According to the theory, individuals learn by observing the actions, behaviors, and experiences of others in their social environment, especially those they admire or see as role models. Students often look up to celebrities as their role models in the entertainment industry. These celebrities, such as famous musicians, football players, and actors, are seen as successful and influential individuals who have achieved fame and recognition in their respective fields. Students may aspire to be like these celebrities, not only because of their talents and achievements but also due to the social status and admiration they receive from the public. Students may become motivated to pursue similar paths When they see their role models excelling in their careers and enjoying widespread recognition. They believe that by emulating the behaviors and skills of their idols, they can also achieve success and recognition in the entertainment industry.

It was established through the third research question that the extent to which students' career choices depend on their exposure to skills is significant. This result is not surprising and may be attributed to students' desire to expand their scope of knowledge in fields they have prior knowledge than follow new paths. Furthermore, many students may wish to follow areas with adequate knowledge for optimal performance. This finding strengthens the results of previous studies on skills, which tend to reveal the connection between entrepreneurial, work, or job competence (Baglama & Uzunboylu, 2017; Fatin & Salim, 2020; Isah & Hashim, 2018; Jackson, 2015; Mustapha, 2017; Ogunleye, 2014). Furthermore, the results also corroborates the findings of Oluwale et al. (2013) and Jackson (2015). Both studies underscore the significance of exposure to skills and experiences before making career choices. The findings suggest that students actively engaging in skill-building activities, vocational experiences, and internships are better positioned to select careers matching their interests and strengths. This prior exposure allows them to assess potential career paths realistically and understand the demands and rewards associated with specific professions. Consequently, students who have gained prior skills are more likely to make informed and confident career decisions, leading to greater career satisfaction and success in the long run. This study showed the possibility for students with specific skills to make choices outside their skill areas. This is attributed to the desire of some individuals to take up new challenges or gain experience from a broad spectrum of areas, among others. However, the trend shows that most individuals will likely follow their skill areas than pick up new ones.

5. CONCLUSION

This study was designed to determine how students' exposure to different skills impacted their career intentions/choices as they enter university. The study discovered that the prospective university students in the Ikom Education Zone of Cross River State who participated in the study all possessed one form of vocational skill. Prospective university students intend to follow different career paths in alignment with their skills. Therefore, prior exposure to skills matters in the career choices of prospective university students. This study has practical implications because it has shown that, aside from prevalent factors such as gender, age, parents, and peers, students' exposure to specific skills is associated with their career choices before entering university. However, these choices may not often end up being the career paths of most students due to other factors. This study is useful to align prospective students, especially those already engaged in vocational training, to follow related career paths. It can also help parents decide whether to engage their children in skills before pursuing a university education. Higher education institutions, particularly universities, can also consider admitting students based on their acquired skills, thereby reducing the production of half-baked graduates. The study has also contributed to the existing body of knowledge currently in the literature in related areas. This study has counselling implications for the proper

guidance of students seeking to make career decisions. Career counsellors may also find this study relevant because a quick decision may be reached by letting students study courses related to their skills or the other way around. Based on the conclusion of this study, it was recommended that professional counsellors seeking to offer career guidance should take students' pre-skills acquired into context before making any decision. This may help counselees to align their careers in areas with prior knowledge for a deeper grounding. It is also recommended that secondary school students learn at least one vocational skill related to their career dreams and master it fully to enable them to gain complete mastery and possibly perform optimally. Lastly, parents and caregivers should ensure that they allow their children and wards the autonomy to make career decisions without interference.

This study faces the limitation of a small scope in terms of geography, indicating that the result of this study can be generalized to the Ikom Education Zone population of prospective university students. Secondly, the researchers should have considered students with multiple skills or career intentions; however, it was beyond the scope of the study. Future research in related areas should focus on exploring the career intentions of students based on their possession of multiple skills. This study did not test whether students' career choices' dependency on their pre-acquisition skills is favorable for optimal academic performance, career progress, or excellence. Prospective researchers should test for the long-run effect of students' exposure to skills on career progress and performance.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.
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Appendix 1. Crosstab of prospective university students' skills versus their career intentions.

	Career interest											
Skills possessed	**Accountant**	**Actor/ Actress**	**Agriculturist**	**Ambassador**	**Architect**	**Banker**	**Botanist**	**Businessman/ woman**	**Comedian**	**Computer engineer**	**Computer programmer**	**cosmetology**
Acting	0	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Arts/Graphics design	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	5	5	0
Baking	0	0	9	2	0	0	3	0	7	0	0	0
Barbing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
Beads making	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Blacksmithing	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Carpentry/Furniture making	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chemist	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Computer operation/manipulation	11	7	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	16	17	0
Computer Repairs	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	21	3	0
Cooking	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cosmetology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	35
Dancing	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Drawing	2	0	0	0	20	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Driving	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Electrical installation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Farming	11	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0
Fishing	10	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
Footballing	13	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	0	0	0
Hairdressing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Marketing	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	8	0	0	0	0
Mechanic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Paint making	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Phone Repairs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	8	0
Sattelite dish installation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sewing/Fashion design	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	0	0	0
Shoe Making	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	0	0	0	0
Singing	0	0	6	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Soap making	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Video coverage	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Welding	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	47	40	32	5	26	18	3	29	32	55	33	35

Skills possessed	Career interest											
	Counsellor	Dancer	Economist	Electrician	Engineer	Fashionista	Footballer	Lawyer	Lecturer	Makeup artist	Marketer	Medical doctor
Acting	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0
Arts/Graphics design	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	6	0	6	0	4
Baking	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	8
Barbing	0	0	0	3	4	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Beads making	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	3
Blacksmithing	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Carpentry/Furniture making	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	26	0	0	0	0
Chemist	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Computer operation	0	0	5	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0
Computer repairs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Cooking	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	37	0	15	0	12
Cosmetology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dancing	0	24	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Drawing	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Driving	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	2	7
Electrical installation	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Farming	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	19	0	0	0	7
Fishing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Footballing	0	0	0	0	0	0	31	0	0	0	0	0
Hairdressing	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	12	0	0	0	10
Marketing	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	4
Mechanic	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Paint making	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Phone Repairs	0	0	0	8	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sattelite dish installation	0	0	0	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sewing/Fashion design	0	2	0	0	0	14	0	21	0	4	0	11
Shoe making	2	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	6	0
Singing	0	7	0	0	0	0	7	8	0	0	0	9
Soap making	0	0	0	3	0	3	0	4	0	4	0	0
Video coverage	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Welding	0	0	0	12	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	2	33	17	34	62	20	45	154	2	29	17	95

Skills possessed	Career interest													
	Microbiologist	Musician	Nurse	Pharmacist	Physicist	Pilot	Politician	Radiographer	Referee	Researcher/ Scientist	Soldier/ Navy	Surveyor	Teacher	Total
Acting	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	31
Arts/Graphics design	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	37
Baking	0	10	20	5	0	0	3	0	0	0	8	0	0	77
Barbing	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Beads making	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17
Blacksmithing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Carpentry/Furniture making	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	36
Chemist	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
Computer operation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	69
Computer repairs	0	0	0	2	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	43
Cooking	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	83
Cosmetology	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	35
Dancing	1	17	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	55
Drawing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	35
Driving	0	0	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	29
Electrical installation	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	20
Farming	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	58
Fishing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20
Footballing	0	0	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	88
Hairdressing	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	31
Marketing	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	42
Mechanic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Paint making	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11
Phone Repairs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	26
Sattelite dish installation	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Sewing/Fashion design	0	9	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	79
Shoe Making	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	4	4	0	38
Singing	3	23	4	7	0	4	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	85
Soap making	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20
Video coverage	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Welding	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19
Total	4	74	52	28	19	16	28	8	1	5	19	6	10	1135