

# Innovations

## Understanding Employability Skills Development of Business Education Students in Work Placement Learning: The Role of Learning Styles

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**Abstract:** *This study relies upon the experiential learning theory to examine the effects of work placement learning on employability skills (i.e., leadership, teamwork, communication, information technology, adaptability, bookkeeping and basic accounting) development, mediated by students' learning styles. Using data from 439 final-year business education students from 11 public universities in Nigeria who had completed the compulsory six-month work placement learning in business organizations and returned to their respective campuses to complete their degree programmes, we test the proposed hypotheses employing path analysis. The results showed positive effects of work placement learning on employability skills construct except bookkeeping. However, we found evidence of positive effect of work placement learning on the students' learning styles, and learning styles significantly influenced their employability skills development except bookkeeping. Lastly, we found that learning styles mediated the effect of WPL on the employability skills constructs except bookkeeping skills. The results of our study contribute to improving work placement learning programme and employability skills development nexus via learning styles among business education undergraduate students.*

**Keywords:** *work placement learning, employability skills, experiential learning, business education students*

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### Introduction

Universities around the world invest in students' employability skills development-related programmes such as work placement learning (WPL) to ensure that graduates possess the right skills to meet the demands of employers (Okolie et al., 2021a). Although employability skills research is extant in the literature (e.g., Okunuga & Ajeyalemi, 2018; Pitan, 2017), there is a need for further research to learn how WPL might influence employability skills development of business education students and the underlying mediating factor via which such relationships might exist. A previous study (Smith & Comyn, 2004,

p. 319) pointed out that “employability skills are not necessarily developed at school to be applied later at work”. Hence, the reason to send students to industry to gain work experience before graduation. The present study focused on university students in a business education degree programme who recently completed the compulsory six-month WPL and then returned to their respective campuses to complete their programme (Chukwuedo & Ementa, 2022; Okolie et al., 2021b; Nwosu et al., 2022). It examined how and whether the WPL, which is a form of experiential learning they undertook in the various firms that accepted them for placements, influenced their employability skills development.

WPL is an important skills development programme of higher education institutions which aims at exposing students to real-world experiential learning through training in a professional setting. Okolie et al. (2021b) defined WPL as a carefully planned and supervised skills development programme that aims to provide university students with opportunities to learn on the job under qualified industry and faculty-based supervisors. Upon completing the WPL programme, students are expected to have gained a certain level of work experience which can enhance their search for jobs in existing firms or start their own business ventures to create jobs after graduation. In many countries around the world, higher education students spend between three, six to twelve months during WPL undertaking normal job roles with organizations during their penultimate years of their degree programme (Poulter & Smith, 2006). For example, in Nigeria, business education students, in addition to others in the fields of Sciences, Engineering, and Technology who are in their penultimate year of their four or five-year degree programmes are sent to relevant organizations to learn on the on-the-job, and integrate theories they have learned in the classrooms into practice (Industrial Training Fund, 2013). Also, in the Nigerian higher education system, business education is an accredited degree programme for students who either wish to pursue teaching careers, further their studies to become professionally trained managers, employees of existing organizations or set up their own businesses after graduation (Chukwuedo & Ementa, 2022; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013; Industrial Training Funds, 2013).

Within the WPL periods, students are exposed to various experiential learning tasks to help them to develop new knowledge, skills and attitudes to work roles by implementing many theoretical knowledge and concepts gained into real-world practice (Okolie et al., 2021b). Sending students to industries or organizations for WPL may help to establish stronger links between universities, communities and industries (Okolie et al., 2021b). According to Poulter and Smith (2006, p. 43), WPL “provides students the opportunity to learn about the attitudes of the organisation for which they are working and to relate these attitudes to knowledge and skills learnt as part of their degrees”. Previous studies (Chukwuedo & Ementa, 2022; Nunley et al., 2016; Nghia & Nguyen, 2019; Okolie et al., 2022; Otache & Edokpolor, 2022) have found positive links between WPL and various positive outcomes such as attitudes to learning, employability and

career development. Despite the positive links, we argue a need to further examine how undertaking WPL influences certain important employability skills that business education students require to succeed after graduation. This is an important empirical and theoretical gap that the present study examined systematically.

Employability skills has received considerable attention from scholars, stakeholders, students and higher education institutions (Okolie et al., 2021a; Pitan, 2017), and efforts are made by universities to equip students with the right skills for finding jobs after graduation given the competitiveness of the labour market (Cheng et al., 2022). We build upon Pitan's (2017) conceptualization of employability skills to define them as transferable and non-technical skills required to perform all jobs in the ever-dynamic global job market. Given the role of globalization which may have affected the availability of jobs for new university graduates (Okolie et al., 2021a), ensuring that students develop relevant employability skills needed to succeed in their various fields of profession have become relevant. This is important given that it can help to reduce mismatch between skills the graduates developed and those in demand by the employers in their major professions. Because the present study focused on business education undergraduate students, we relied upon extant literature review (e.g., Griffin & Coelhoso, 2019; Griffin & Annulis, 2013; Maelah et al., 2014; Mainga et al., 2021) to identify seven relevant employability skills that business education students should possess namely: leadership, teamwork, communication, information technology, adaptability, bookkeeping, and basic accounting. We rely upon the assumptions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) to argue that these seven important employability skills are pertinent for gainful employment mainly in business organizations and may help business education students who choose to be self-employed to start and manage their business ventures successfully after graduation.

As experiential learning theory (ELT) Kolb (1984) explains, learning based on experience is an integral part of how individuals learn new ideas, knowledge and develop skills. The theory explains that individuals can learn on their own when they are exposed to learning-by-doing. According to Manolis et al. (2013), Kolb's learning styles inventory can be used to understand how students learn, and categorized learners into divergers (concrete experience/reflective observation), assimilators (abstract conceptualization/reflective observation), convergers (abstract conceptualization/active experimentation) and accommodators (concrete experience/active experimentation). Previous research (Gyeong & Myung, 2008, p. 101) noted that "If students' learning styles are assessed, learning activities that further reinforce strengths or that develop weaker phases can be systematically planned to maximize thinking and problem-solving abilities". This agrees with Kolb (1976) that students must understand each learning modes and the resulting learning styles. Linked to the present study, we argue that during WPL, the various forms of learning styles would

enable learners to construct knowledge on their own leading to higher employability skills development. For example, previous studies (Garcia-Otero & Teddlie, 1992; Gyeong & Myung, 2008; Kolb & Kolb, 2006) noted that certain experiential learning experiences may motivate students to use or develop their preferred learning styles to enhance their knowledge and skills development.

We, therefore, examine the relationships between WPL and the seven important employability skills that business education undergraduate students should possess focusing on the underlying mediating role of learning styles given its centrality in enhance knowledge and skills development (Kolb & Kolb, 2006; Monalis et al., 2013). Since WPL is experiential in nature (Chukwuedo & Ementa, 2022; Industrial Training Funds, 2013), and activities are designed and mostly carried out in ways that allow students the opportunity to engage in their most preferred learning styles to construct learning on their own (Otache & Edokpolor, 2022), it may directly and indirectly influence higher development of the seven identified employability skills in the business education students. Using this framework, the present study contributes to knowledge on WPL, learning styles and employability skills development among business education undergraduate students in developing world context.

### **Theoretical and Hypotheses Development**

The ELT (Kolb, 1984) underpins the present study. It explains that learning has occurred when individuals acquire new knowledge and skills. Therefore, experiential learning in which WPL programme is built upon is the process of learning-by-doing or learning by practice or on-the-job experience. Experiential learning helps to understand how individuals can transform hands-on experiences into applied knowledge and skills. Kolb (1984, p. 41) defined learning as a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. This therefore, means that knowledge and skills are gained or acquired when individuals on WPL grasp and transform their experiences. The ELT postulates that experiential learning takes place when the four steps referred to as learning cycles namely; concreting learning (i.e., learning new ideas or concepts), reflective learning (i.e., personal reflection on experiences), abstract conceptualization (i.e., formation of new ideas and adjusting one’s thinking based on personal experience) and active experimentation (i.e., applying the new ideas to real-world practice) are well understood by learners (Healey & Jenkins, 2000). These four stages or cycles cover both grasping and transforming experiences. The ELT (1984) postulates that students learn more when they are exposed to real-life hands-on training situations in which they can practice the theories learned in classrooms. Thus, we consider ELT most appropriate for learning how business education undergraduate students might develop the seven identified employability skills in WPL via learning styles.

The rationale for focusing on the ELT assumptions is because no meaningful learning can take place during an experiential learning programme such as WPL if students' do not apply these learning styles (Monalis et al., 2013). Thus, students' learning styles may likely influence how they engage in the various experiential learning tasks assigned to them by their instructors or supervisors, reflect on their learning experiences, conceptualize new ideas from their learning tasks and develop relevant employability skills (e.g., Chukwuedo & Ementa, 2022; Okorie et al., 2022; Uwakwe et al., 2022). Additionally, ELT is based on six propositions that learning: "(a) is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes, (b) is a continuous process grounded in experience, (c) requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world, (d) is a holistic process of adaptation, (e) results from synergistic transactions between the person and the environment and (f) is the process of creating knowledge" (Kolb & Kolb, 2006, p. 47). Consistent with Otache and Edokpolor (2022), knowledge and skills acquired through the practical experience will stick in learners' minds.

### **Linking WPL and Employability Skills Development**

Drawing upon the ELT perspective, WPL can enhance students' employability skills development given that it provides a formal framework for students to learn at workplaces (Bolli et al., 2021), and provides students with the opportunity to apply and practice the skills and knowledge they have acquired through their studies. WPL is known with various terminologies such as work integrated learning, internships, work-based learning, and apprenticeship (e.g., Nghia & Duyen, 2019; Okorie et al., 2022), and equips students with important skills for future job search. For example, to assess WPL-related outcomes, Nghia and Duyen (2019) developed and validated the 11-item "internship related learning outcomes" scale which has been widely adapted (e.g., Otache & Edokpolor, 2022; Chukwuedo & Ementa, 2022) to study WPL outcomes in different contexts. Employability skills development on the other hand, involves students' development of important skills they need to succeed in their future jobs. The present study has identified seven important employability skills in addition to others (e.g., Griffin & Coelho, 2019; Maelah et al., 2014; Pitan, 2017) that business education students are expected to develop in order to secure employment in business firms after graduation.

The first was leadership skill, which is recognized for its importance in enhancing employees' motivation to work toward achieving organizational goals. Previous studies (e.g., Atkinson, 2015) have defined leadership skills as one's ability to positively drive change, commit to achieving organisational goals and motivate others to engage effectively in sustaining the organizational vision. Leadership skill is important to organizations as effective leadership motivates employees to work toward achieving organizational goals (e.g., Cronin et al., 2019). Previous studies (e.g., Atkinson, 2015) have reported that without effective

leadership in organizations, required growth may not be experienced. Vroom and Jago (2007, p. 18) defined leadership as “a process of motivating individuals to work together collaboratively to accomplish great things”. Leadership skill can be viewed as one's ability to positively drive change, commit to achieving organisational goals and motivate others to engage effectively in sustaining the organizational vision. Thus, business education students need to develop leadership skill to positively influence other people's values, beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and increase the quality and effectiveness of their future organizations (Ganta & Manukonda, 2014).

Teamwork skill is second on the list of important employability skills that business education students need for future jobs in business firms. It has been defined as a set of collective actions instrumental to generating valuable results for teams (McKendall, 2000). Individuals with teamwork skills may likely collaborate or co-work effectively with other employees in organizations to accomplish tasks. Working as a team may not be easy for individuals who have not developed teamwork skills, and may affect organizations negatively when such individuals are employed (e.g., Cronin et al., 2019). Teamwork is defined as a set of collective actions instrumental to generating valuable results for teams (Cronin et al., 2019; McKendall, 2000). It is an important skill for business education graduates given that the majority may work in business organizations/firms. Individuals who have developed teamwork skill may likely collaborate or co-work effectively with other employees in organizations to accomplish tasks. However, students may develop this important skill in WPL if they perceive higher teamwork among the employees in their placement organizations.

Communication was the third skill on our list. It can enable individuals to communicate ideas or concepts to people. Because new business education graduates would be tested for their ability to effectively communicate during job interviews, universities have ensured that students are better equipped to communicate clearly and effectively at the workplace through the WPL programme (Okolie et al., 2021a). The ability to communicate information accurately, clearly and as intended, is a vital life skill that employers require for future employment. Also, information technology skill refers to individuals' ability to effectively use personal electronic devices such as laptops, other computers, smartphones, and associated technologically supported devices to achieve tasks (Cronin et al., 2019; Maelah et al., 2014). The importance of this skill tops the agenda of every university in recent times given its centrality to graduate employability.

Among the important employability skills that business education students should possess is information technology skill. This skill refers to individuals' ability to effectively use personal electronic devices such as laptops, other computers, smartphones, and associated technologically supported devices to achieve tasks (Pitan, 2017; Maelah et al., 2014). The importance of students'

development of information technology skill tops the agenda of every higher education in recent times given its centrality to graduate employability. The rapid information technology advances have extended to all aspects of businesses, and the impacts of information technology on business growth and development have motivated higher education institutions to engage students in programme reforms to keep pace with changes in technological advancements (Pitan, 2017).

Adaptability skill is among the employability skills that business education students require. Drawing upon Savickas' (1997) conceptualization, adaptability skill in the present study's context may be viewed as students' readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in work roles during WPL and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by moving from their school environments to workplace. Previous studies (Smith & Comyn, 2004) have reported that employers typically look for graduates with adaptability skill due to their importance in achieving organizational goals. Adaptability skill may enable students to cope with the work-related challenges that may arise with changes in their learning environments such as from school to industry.

The sixth important employability skills we identified is bookkeeping skill. The business graduates require this skill to understand the basic principles of keeping records of documents in organizations. It is an important employability skill given its centrality in employees' ability to record and file manually or electronically important business documents such as sales, purchases, rents, leases, and utility bills documents among others. Owusu et al. (2015) defined bookkeeping as a systematic process of capturing the economic consequence of business transactions in compliance with accepted recording standards. Therefore, students who undertake WPL in business organizations may likely develop bookkeeping skill given that they may be exposed to the practice of recording and filing organizations' documents. We argue that graduates with bookkeeping skill may support organizations in terms of improving efficiency, decision-making and productivity.

Lastly, we noted that business education students require basic accounting skills to succeed in future job search. Basic accounting skills such as preparing a financial budget for organizations' expenses, and posting transactions from journals to ledger among others may be an asset to business organizations (Owusu et al., 2015). Previous study (e.g., Beard & Schwieger, 2008) have identified basic accounting skill as a required skill in organizations for providing high-quality professional services to clients and accountability. Linked to ELT perspectives (Kolb, 1984), business education students undertaking WPL may likely develop these seven important employability skills that they need in addition to others soft skills to succeed after graduation.

### **Mediating Role Learning Styles**

Fletcher et al. (2008, p. 378) explained that, “an understanding of the preferred learning style of an individual provides an insight into the teaching methods that are likely to be most effective for that individual”. Monalis et al. (2013) has defined learning styles as the composition of cognitive, affective and physiological behaviours that indicate how individuals learn by perceiving, interacting with and responding to learning tasks, materials and environments. Other earlier studies (Choi et al., 2009; Graf et al., 2009; Nussbaumer & Guerin, 2000; Zhang & Lambert, 2008) have found positive correlations between learning styles and positive learning outcomes such as critical thinking abilities, working memory capacity, problem-solving, recall of ideas, and visualization skills, among others. However, WPL programme has been designed to accommodate students’ various learning styles given that the activities are mostly experiential (Industrial Training Funds, 2013). Therefore, the WPL activities can make students to look at their learning tasks from different perspectives, become sensitive, brainstorm, watch carefully as their instructors demonstrate to them; Kolb and Kolb (2006) referred to the learning style as “diverging” (feeling and watching). Also, during WPL, learning tasks may motivate students to seek explanations of wide-ranging information from their instructors to enable them gain clearer ideas and concepts into the learning tasks. Kolb referred to such learning style as “assimilating” (watching and thinking). Students undertaking WPL activities may be motivated to experiment with new ideas by using practical applications of what they have learned to solve identified problems. Also, students to engage in abstract conceptualization and active experimentation in order to solve identified problems and make decisions (e.g., Turesky & Gallagher, 2011); Kolb referred to such learning style as “converging” (doing and thinking). Lastly, students undertaking WPL may likely use both concrete experience and active experimentation to learn and process information (e.g., DiMuro & Terry, 2007), and Kolb referred to such learning style as “accommodating” (doing and feeling).

Consistent with Kolb’s learning styles inventory, Monalis et al. (2013) identified three important forms of learning styles including reflective observation/active experimentation, concrete experience and abstract conceptualization. Relying upon ELT, Monalis et al (2013) redeveloped and validated the Kolb’s learning styles inventory to help examine the learning styles in many contexts. Overall, for meaningful learning to take place, students must be actively involved in the experiential learning, reflect on the tasks, conceptualize the tasks, apply decision-making and problem-solving skills to use the new concepts they gained from their learning tasks (Otache & Edokpolor, 2022). Relying upon the assumptions of ELT, the present study argues that WPL as an experiential learning provides students with the opportunity to apply the various learning styles to solve identified problems in real-life settings (e.g., Feldmann, 2016), and applying the various learning styles can enable students to gain

knowledge, experiences and develop employability skills. Relying upon ELT, we consider learning styles a mediator variable in the relationship between WPL and the seven employability skills that business education students require. Hence, we posit the following hypotheses (Figure 1):

**Hypothesis 1:** WPL would positively influence students' employability skills development: (a) leadership, (b) teamwork, (c) communication, (d) information technology, (e) adaptability, (f) bookkeeping and (g) basic accounting.

**Hypothesis 2:** WPL would positively influence students' learning styles.

**Hypothesis 3:** Students' learning styles would positively influence their employability skills development: (a) leadership, (b) teamwork, (c) communication, (d) information technology, (e) adaptability, (f) bookkeeping, and (g) basic accounting.

**Hypothesis 4:** Learning Styles would mediate the effect of WPL on students' employability skills: (a) leadership, (b) teamwork, (c) communication, (d) information technology, (e) adaptability, (f) bookkeeping, and (g) basic accounting.

## Method

### Samples and Procedures

In this study, we choose to surveyed business education undergraduate students who had already undertaken the six months compulsory WPL (e.g., Industrial Training Funds, 2013) in business organizations, and then returned to their respective campuses to complete the remaining part of their four-year degree programmes. We purposefully selected 11 public universities in Nigeria that offer business education degree programme. We got the necessary permissions from the institutions and all ethical considerations were duly observed. The business education students were approached at their various campuses to complete the structured questionnaire face-to-face. To complete the survey, students who willingly agreed signed the consent forms attached to the survey. Also, they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. We collected data at three-time waves to help reduce the common method bias associated with self-report measures (Podsakoff et al., 2003). At wave 1 (first semester 2021), participants willingly responded to the survey containing questionnaire items for WPL and learning styles scales only. At wave 2 (during the second semester of 2021), participants willingly completed to survey containing items of employability skills scales. Another reason for collecting the data at two waves was to help reduce the rate of completing the questionnaire without making meaning of the item statements as too many items in a survey may uninterest

respondents. Through this approach, we received a total of 486 completed copies of questionnaire within an academic calendar year. However, 47 copies of the completed survey that contained incomplete responses were discarded from the total of 486 cases collected leaving 439 cases used for analysis. Among the participants, 203 (46.24%) were males and 236 (53.76%) were females between age range of 20 to 26 years old.

### Measures

Because we removed all copies of completed questionnaire with missing information, we applied no techniques to handle missing data. However, the measurement scales for measuring all the variables were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and the following parameters were used to check the data fit indexes namely; Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = > 0.90;  $\chi^2/df$  = < 3.0; standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = < 0.08, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = < 0.06 and PClose = > 0.05. However, the validity and reliability of the scales were estimated as the discriminant validity (DV), average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CV) and Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) reliability values met the recommended thresholds respectively (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

*Work Placement Learning.* We adapted the 11-item "internship related learning outcome" (Nghia & Duyen, 2019) to measure this variable. Responses ranged from (1 = *Very Little* to 7 = *Very Much*). We reworded "Internship" in the original scale to "Work placement learning" to suit the terminology of the present study. A sample item included: "The work placement learning helps me to develop relevant skills that I lack". The original scale reported an overall Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.94. In the present study, the 11 items were subjected to a one-factor CFA, and the data showed a good fit:  $\chi^2 = 64.24$ ;  $df = 44$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.46$ ; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.05 and PClose = 0.41 with validity and reliability values; CR = 0.91; AVE = 0.64, DV = 0.79 and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.91.

*Learning Styles.* This was measured using the 17-item "learning styles inventory" (Monalis et al., 2013). The scale has three factors. The first is reflective observation/active experimentation (7 items; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.84); the second factor is concrete experience (5 items; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.85) and the third factor is abstract conceptualization (5 items; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.79). Responses ranged from (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). A sample item included "I learn best when I listen and watch carefully". In the present study, the 17 items were subjected to a one-factor CFA to measure learning styles and the data yielded a good fit:  $\chi^2 = 233.24$ ;  $df = 119$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.96$ ; CFI = 0.98; IFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.07 and PClose = 0.19 with the validity and reliability values; CR = 0.89; AVE = 0.59, DV = 0.77, and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.90.

*Leadership skill.* This variable was measured using the 8-item leadership skill sub-scale of "life skills ability scale" for higher education students (Cronin et al., 2019). Responses ranged from (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 6 = *Strongly Agree*). A sample item included: "I am able to positively influence a group of individuals".

The original scale reported test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from .77 to .92. The one factor CFA in the present study indicated a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 = 45.60$ ;  $df = 20$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.28$ ; CFI = 0.98; IFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.05 and PClose = 0.11 with validity and reliability values; CR = 0.93; AVE = 0.67, DV = 0.82, and Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.94$ .

*Information Technology skill.* Because we did not find an existing validated measurement scale to measure this variable in the context of the present study, we followed the recommendations (Carpenter, 2018) to self-develop the 5-item "information technology skill sub-scale" to measure the variable. The items were "I can use computers to search skills development related information for my future career", "I am able to use the internet to gather and process information", "I can manage various skills development tasks using different information technology devices", "I can interpret large dataset using computer software", and "I can use digital technologies to communicate ideas effectively". Responses ranged from (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The one factor CFA for the data showed a good fit:  $\chi^2 = 5.10$ ;  $df = 5$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.02$ ; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.02, RMSEA = 0.04 and PClose = 0.64 with validity and reliability values; CR = 0.85; AVE = 0.54, DV = 0.74, and the Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ .

*Adaptability skill.* We relied upon adaptability concepts (Savickas, 2013), and followed the recommendations (Carpenter, 2018) to self-develop the 5-item "adaptability skill scale" to specifically measure the variable in our study context. Responses ranged from (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The items include: "I can adjust my plans to changing work conditions", "I have learned new ways of changing old practices", "I have learned new ways to get along well with others", "I can push myself to complete important tasks that are urgent", and "I can adjust my plans to perform well in changing conditions". The one factor CFA yielded a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 = 7.15$ ;  $df = 5$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.43$ ; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.05 and PClose = 0.42 with validity and reliability values; CR = 0.92; AVE = 0.66, DV = 0.81, and Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.93$ .

*Teamwork skill.* We used the 7-item teamwork skill sub-scale of "life skills ability scale" for higher education students (Cronin et al., 2019) to measure the variable. Responses ranged from (1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree). A sample item included: "I am able to work well within a team/group". The original scale showed a good test-retest reliability coefficient ranging from .77 to .92. In the present study, the one factor CFA indicated a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 = 26.46$ ;  $df = 14$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.89$ ; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.02, RMSEA = 0.04 and PClose = 0.13 with validity and reliability values; CR = 0.90; AVE = 0.59, DV = 0.77, and Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.91$ .

*Bookkeeping skill.* We self-developed the 5-item "bookkeeping skill scale" relying on the recommendations (Carpenter, 2018) to measure the variable. Items were "I can index important business documents", "I am able to keep accurate records of financial reports", "I can sort or organize indexed business documents", "I can understand and interpret indexed business documents" and "I can enter

*datasets into a system or archive*". Responses ranged from (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). In the present study, the one factor CFA had a good data fit:  $\chi^2 = 7.65$ ;  $df = 5$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.53$ ; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.05 and PClose = 0.36 with validity and reliability values; CR = 0.88; AVE = 0.65, DV = 0.81, and the Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ .

*Communication skill*. We used the 4-item sub-scale of "life skills ability scale" for higher education students (Cronin et al., 2019) to measure the variable. Responses ranged from (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 6 = *Strongly Agree*). A sample item included "*I am able to speak clearly to others*". The original scale reported a test-retest reliability coefficient ranging from .77 to .92. The one factor CFA in the present study had a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 = 4.06$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.03$ ; CFI = 0.98; IFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.96; SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.06 and PClose = 0.08 with the following validity and reliability values; CR = 0.88; AVE = 0.60; DV = 0.77, and the Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ .

*Basic Accounting skill*. Given the lack of suitable validated scale to measure this variable in our study context, we followed the recommendations (Carpenter, 2018) to self-develop a 6-item "basic accounting skill scale". The items are: "*I can competently present a financial statement of cash flow*", "*I am able to generate financial statements*", "*I can use basic accounting software*", "*I can interpret financial statements*", "*I can calculate return on investment*", and "*I can set budgets that can maximize financial growth of a small firm*". Responses ranged from (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*). The one factor CFA indicate a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 = 10.65$ ;  $df = 5$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.13$ ; CFI = 0.98; IFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.96; SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.05 and PClose = 0.07 with the following validity and reliability values; CR = 0.90; AVE = 0.64, DV = 0.80, and the Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.91$ .

*Control variables*. We controlled for the students' gender only in this study given the number of the employability skills constructs to learn their effects on the students' employability skills.

### **Common Method Bias**

Participants responded to the scales with different response scales to ensure that the options most applicable to them were ticked carefully. Additionally, we conducted Harman's one-factor test (Harman, 1967) with all scales for testing the proposed hypotheses. The analysis showed that common method bias was not an issue in the dataset (29% explained by the first factor).

### **Measurement Invariance Test**

Because data were collected from participants from 11 different public universities in Nigeria at two waves using the same scales, we check for measurement invariance to ensure that the respondents ascribed the same meanings to the scale items (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). We used the following fit parameters;  $\chi^2/df$  = CFI, TLI, IFI and RMSEA for the configural and metric

invariance tests, and then included the *P-values* of the Chi-square ( $\Delta x^2$ ) difference tests (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). The results as shown in Table 1, showed that the measurement invariant test for all the scales was achieved.

**Table 1**

Results of the Measurement Invariance Tests of all Constructs Across Respondents at Waves 1 and 2.

Variables	$\Delta x^2$	<i>P-Value</i>	$x^2/df$	CFI	TLI	IFI	RMSEA
<b>Work Placement Learning</b>							
Configural Invariance			2.55	0.95	0.92	0.95	0.05
Metric Invariance	2.24	0.93	1.85	0.95	0.92	0.95	0.04
<b>Learning Styles</b>							
Configural Invariance			3.97	0.96	0.94	0.96	0.06
Metric Invariance	3.12	0.21	3.23	0.94	0.91	0.94	0.05
<b>Leadership Skill</b>							
Configural Invariance			3.08	0.95	0.93	0.95	0.05
Metric Invariance	5.93	0.47	2.50	0.97	0.94	0.96	0.04
<b>Teamwork Skill</b>							
Configural Invariance			3.05	0.96	0.95	0.96	0.03
Metric Invariance	4.42	0.14	2.45	0.95	0.92	0.95	0.04
<b>Communication Skill</b>							
Configural Invariance			3.52	0.96	0.93	0.96	0.05
Metric Invariance	2.87	0.73	2.82	0.97	0.95	0.97	0.03
<b>Information technology Skill</b>							
Configural Invariance			2.65	0.94	0.91	0.94	0.07
Metric Invariance	3.84	0.62	2.01	0.95	0.92	0.95	0.05
<b>Adaptability Skill</b>							
Configural Invariance			2.62	0.95	0.93	0.95	0.05
Metric Invariance	2.89	0.11	2.04	0.96	0.94	0.96	0.03
<b>Bookkeeping Skill</b>							
Configural Invariance			2.59	0.94	0.92	0.93	0.06
Metric Invariance	3.84	0.58	2.02	0.95	0.93	0.95	0.04
<b>Basic accounting skill</b>							
Configural Invariance			3.42	0.94	0.91	0.94	0.06
Metric Invariance	3.11		2.96	0.95	0.93	0.95	0.04

Note: *P*-value from the  $\Delta x^2$  difference test groups. All standardized weights are reported.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analysis**

Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation, and bivariate correlations among variables.

**Table 2**

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Bivariate Correlations among Variables*

		Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Age	1.17	0.38	1	-.19*								
2	Gender	1.66	0.47	-.19*	1.01								
3	Work Placement Learning	14.98	5.54	.05	-.07	1							
4	Learning Styles	12.46	4.23	-.11	-.08	.44**	1						
5	Leadership Skill	14.24	5.53	-.11	-.11	.36**	.45**	1					
6	Teamwork Skill	18.74	6.89	.03	-.10	.45**	.46**	.37**	1				
7	Communication Skill	18.06	5.98	.04	.19*	.48**	.50**	.56**	.52**	1			
8	Information Technology Skill	17.06	5.78	-.11	-.11	.49**	.50**	.54**	.54**	.57**	1		
9	Adaptability Skill	13.03	5.37	-.04	-.11	.50**	.44**	.48**	.44**	.60**	.53**	1	
10	Bookkeeping Skill	14.19	6.20	-.16*	.12	.02	-.01	-.06	-.02	-.01	.09	.04	1
11	Basic Accounting Skill	12.01	5.79	.02	-.11	.45**	.48**	.54**	.58**	.65**	.62**	.45**	.01

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed).

**Test of hypotheses**

To test the proposed hypotheses, path analysis in AMOS version 24 was employed and we applied 2000 bootstrap resample at 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI<sub>95%</sub>). For the mediation analysis, we consider the results significant at .001 or .05 levels if the indirect effects do not include zero (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The path model included all the variables of inthe study with acceptable fit indexes:  $\chi^2/df = 2.67$ ; CFI = 0.95; IFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.93; SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.05 and PClose = 0.37. As shown in Table 3, the results of the path analysis showed that WPL had positively significant effects ontheemployability skills constructs: leadership ( $\beta = 0.18, P < .001$ ),teamwork ( $\beta = 0.36, P < .001$ ),communication ( $\beta = 0.30, P < .001$ ); information technology ( $\beta = 0.34, P < .001$ ),adaptability ( $\beta = 0.48, P < .001$ ) and basic accounting ( $\beta = 0.22, P < .001$ ), whereas it had no evidence of positive effect on bookkeeping ( $\beta = 0.05, P = .69$ ). Thus, we accept hypotheses 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 1e and 1g while 1f was rejected. The path analysis totally and significantly explained the following variance in the employability skills constructs: 27.8% for leadership,30.0%for teamwork,34.5% for communication,29.2% for basic accounting,31.2% for adaptability,3.8% for bookkeeping skill and 34.6% for information technology. The results showed a positive effect of WPL on students' learning styles ( $\beta = 0.38, P < .001$ ), indicating that hypothesis 2 was accepted.

The path analysis (Table 3) showed positive effects of students' learning styles on the employability skills constructs: leadership ( $\beta = 0.36, P < .001$ ), teamwork ( $\beta = 0.26, P < .001$ ), communication ( $\beta = 0.29, P < .001$ ), information

technology ( $\beta = 0.27, p < .001$ ), adaptability ( $\beta = 0.26, P < .001$ ) and basic accounting ( $\beta = 0.28, P < .001$ ). However, the results showed no evidence of a positive effect of learning styles on bookkeeping ( $\beta = 0.02, p = .45$ ). Thus, we accept hypotheses 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e and 3g, whereas hypothesis 3f was rejected. Lastly, using the user-defined estimands function in AMOS, the mediation effects were calculated. The results showed that learning styles positively mediated the effects of WPL on the constructs of employability skills: leadership ( $\beta = 0.17, CI_{95\%} = 0.06, 0.33, P < .001$ ), teamwork ( $\beta = 0.15, CI_{95\%} = -0.04, 0.31$ ), communication ( $\beta = 0.16, CI_{95\%} = -0.04, 0.18$ ), information technology ( $\beta = 0.13, CI_{95\%} = -0.04, 0.18$ ), adaptability ( $\beta = 0.15, CI_{95\%} = -0.05, 0.33$ ) and basic accounting ( $\beta = 0.14, CI_{95\%} = -0.04, 0.31$ ), except bookkeeping ( $\beta = -0.02, CI_{95\%} = -0.09, 0.04$ ). Thus, hypotheses 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4e and 4g, whereas hypothesis 4f was rejected. Regarding the control variable gender which was dummy coded as (1 = males, 0 = females), it was found that female students showed higher level of teamwork ( $\beta = 0.22; CI_{95\%} = -0.08, 0.34; P < .001$ ) and basic accounting skill ( $\beta = 0.24, P < .05$ ) whereas, male students showed higher levels of communication skill only ( $\beta = 0.16, P < .05$ ) in this study. Thus, we found no evidence of positive effects of gender on the other constructs of employability skills among the business education students in the present study.

**Table 3**  
*Results of the Path Model*

	Estimates	Standard Errors	95% Confidence Intervals	
			Lower Limit	Upper Limit
<b>Direct Effects Skills</b>				
	<b>Employability</b>			
Work Placement Learning → Leadership	0.18***	0.08	0.06	0.29
Work Placement Learning → Teamwork	0.36***	0.07	0.23	0.53
Work Placement Learning → Communication	0.30***	0.08	0.19	0.41
Work Placement Learning → Information Technology	0.34***	0.08	0.17	0.52
Work Placement Learning → Adaptability	0.48***	0.07	0.26	0.77
Work Placement Learning → Bookkeeping	0.05	0.06	-0.09	0.23
Work Placement Learning → Basic Accounting	0.22***	0.06	0.14	0.32
<b>Mediator</b>				
Work Placement Learning → Learning Styles	0.38***	0.07	0.27	0.50
Learning Styles → Leadership	0.36***	0.06	0.13	0.59
Learning Styles → Teamwork	0.26***	0.07	0.11	0.45

Learning Styles	→	Communication	0.29***	0.06	0.19	0.43		
Learning Styles	→	Information Technology	0.27***	0.07	0.13	0.46		
Learning Styles	→	Adaptability	0.26***	0.06	0.10	0.45		
Learning Styles	→	Bookkeeping	0.02	0.09	-0.06	0.11		
Learning Styles	→	Basic Accounting	0.28***	0.06	0.15	0.43		
<b>Indirect Effects</b>								
Learning Styles	→	→	WPL	0.17***	0.03	0.06	0.33	
Leadership								
Learning Styles	→	→	WPL	0.15***	0.03	0.04	0.31	
Teamwork								
Learning Styles	→	→	WPL	0.16***	0.04	0.07	0.28	
Communication								
Learning Styles	→	WPL	Information	0.13***	0.03	0.06	0.25	
Technology								
Learning Styles	→	→	WPL	0.15***	0.03	0.05	0.33	
Adaptability								
Learning Styles	→	→	WPL	-0.02	0.04	-0.09	0.04	
Bookkeeping								
Learning Styles	→	WPL	→	Basic	0.14***	0.03	0.07	0.24
Accounting								

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; WPL = work placement learning. All standardized regression weights are reported.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Guided by the ELT (Kolb, 1984), we examined whether the effect of WPL on employability skills development among business education students, mediated by learning styles. Relying upon the assumptions of ELT, our study contributes to WPL and employability skills literature by focusing on the important employability skills that business education students might likely develop during WPL in business organizations. Our findings contribute to the important mediating role of learning styles in the WPL and employability skills nexus in business education students. Our findings revealed that the effect of WPL on the employability skills constructs namely: leadership, teamwork, communication, information technology, adaptability and basic accounting were positively significant in this population (hypotheses 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 1e and 1g). Drawing upon ELT and the findings, a possible interpretation could mean that experiential learning activities the students undertook during WPL enhanced the level of their leadership, teamwork, communication, information technology, adaptability and basic accounting skills development.

Although the effect of WPL on employability skills development is extant in the literature, to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has examined the effect of WPL on the seven identified employability skills among business education undergraduates, mediated by learning styles, particularly, in developing world contexts. The findings suggest that the more business education students engage in WPL tasks which promotes experiential learning, the more they develop higher levels of these important employability skills that they need to succeed in the future (e.g., Nwosu et al., 2022; Okolie et al., 2021a; Smith & Hodge, 2019). We found no evidence of any positively significant effect of WPL on bookkeeping skill (hypothesis 1f). The interpretation of this result could mean that the students' perception of WPL bookkeeping tasks may not have been adequate to improve their bookkeeping skill in this population. Another possible interpretation of this result could mean that the majority of the organizations that accepted the students for WPL may have not placed a higher emphasis on bookkeeping practice which may have caused a low effect on the business education students' bookkeeping skill development. This result suggests a need for more efforts by business organizations that accept students for WPL to improve their bookkeeping practices to enhance students' bookkeeping skill development (e.g., Owusu et al., 2015).

Drawing upon the ELT and the present results, it could mean that the quality of experiential learning experiences perceived by the business education students were adequate to enhance the other employability skills constructs except bookkeeping skill. The study found that WPL had a positive effect on learning styles (hypothesis 2). This interesting finding corroborates ELT that students' learning experience in an academic environment can influence their learning styles, i.e., choosing the way and manner in which they construct their own learning to develop new ideas and skills (Fletcher et al., 2008; Kolb & Kolb, 2006). Consistent with ELT, when students are tutored and presented with certain learning tasks, they may be encouraged to use and develop other learning styles to further reinforce strengths in their problem-solving abilities (Gyeong & Myung, 2008; Kolb & Kolb, 2006).

On the other hand, we found that learning styles positively influenced the employability skills constructs: leadership, teamwork, communication, information technology, adaptability and basic accounting (hypotheses 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e and 3g) except bookkeeping. These results could mean that the more students develop higher learning styles (i.e., concrete experience, active experimentation, reflective observation and abstract conceptualization) to solve WPL tasks, the more they are likely to develop these important employability skills. Although, the results showed no effect of learning styles on bookkeeping skill (hypothesis 3f), which may have been as a result of the students' perceptions of their level of engagements in bookkeeping learning activities, the findings authenticate the ELT perspectives that experiential learning activities can

motivate individuals' use or development of learning styles leading to knowledge and skills acquisition (Kolb & Kolb, 2006; Manolis et al., 2013).

Lastly, our study found that learning styles significantly mediated the effects of WPL on the employability skills constructs: leadership, teamwork, communication, information technology, adaptability and basic accounting (hypotheses 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4e and 4g) except bookkeeping (hypothesis 4f). Drawing upon the ELT (Kolb, 1984), the results could mean that aside from the increasing effect of WPL on these important employability skills that business education students require in addition to other soft skills, higher level of students' learning styles, in turn, contributed to higher levels of employability skills development except bookkeeping in this population. For example, Monalis et al. (2013, p. 50) explained that "convergence of teaching and learning styles will not only increase the learning effectiveness of students, but will also increase student flexibility, permitting them to alter their learning styles in response to varying environments". The results suggest that with a higher level of students' learning styles, they can clearly understand how to approach their learning tasks during WPL, which may, directly and indirectly, influence their development of these employability skills that they need to succeed after graduation. Therefore, our findings have shown that learning styles is an important mediator via which WPL experiential experience exerted its effects on the employability skills constructs, and validate the ELT postulations in this regard (e.g., DiMuro & Terry, 2007; Kolb & Kolb, 2006).

### **Implications for theory and practice**

This study applies the ELT perspectives to WPL and employability skills nexus and has provided an understanding of the nexus using a sample of business education students in Nigerian universities who had completed the six-months compulsory WPL as a major requirement for graduation (Industrial Training Funds, 2013). The findings of our study have implications for students, universities management, and the industry that send and accept students for WPL. Universities should ensure that students are sent organizations with conducive WPL environment and that instructors and supervisors should encourage students to use and develop their learning styles to tackle learning tasks, which can in turn, enhance their employability skills development (e.g., Okolie et al., 2022; Nwosu et al., 2022). Universities can build stronger links with organization or industries within the universities host communities to ensure that WPL instructors or supervisors adopt better instructional approaches (Ogba et al., 2022) that are oriented toward students' learning styles which tend to be more effective (Monalis et al., 2013; Pfeifer & Borozan, 2011). This agrees with Sharp's (2006, p. 96) recommendation that, "instructors are encouraged to use teaching strategies that both match students' learning styles at times".

For students, it is evident from the ELT and the present findings that WPL positively enhances employability skills development. Therefore, students who

undertake WPL should ensure that they select good firms where they can be properly exposed to various experiential learning tasks to enable them develop employability skills for future jobs or business venture start-up (e.g., Nwosu et al., 2021; Okolie et al., 2021b). Given that students are mostly concerned about getting jobs or becoming entrepreneurs after graduation (Gernjost & Lawter, 2019), undertaking WPL can help them get prepared for entry into the world of work or gain experience to create their own businesses after graduation (O'Donovan, 2018). Therefore, business education students should take WPL seriously so that they can acquire hands-on skills that will help them to improve their employability (Otache & Edokpolr, 2022).

Lastly, the findings have implications for industry that accept students for WPL. It is no doubt that organizations benefit from students on placements since students provide additional capacity in undertaking certain roles and constitute a source of low-cost labour (Otache & Edokpolr, 2022; O'Donovan, 2018; Okorie et al., 2022). Also, employing fresh graduates who already have prior work experience help to reduce money that industries may spend training their fresh employees to develop employability skills (Uwakwe et al., 2022). Therefore, industries should take WPL programme seriously and strengthen the link between them and universities to ensure that more organizations can benefit from the positive outcomes of WPL in terms of future workforce. Overall, the present study has created opportunities for future researchers to examine other important role of students' learning styles during WPL leading to more theory development in this regard.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study is based on a cross-sectional research which means that the relationships presented are correlational. We recommend that future studies can consider an experimental research approach to confirm the results. The participants in this study were university students who had already completed the WPL programme during the data collection which may likely affect their responses, we recommend that future research can conduct ethnographic studies to confirm the findings. We focused only on seven important employability skills that business education students need based on their future job prospects in business organizations. This may limit the generalization of our findings to other employability skills not included in our study even though they may be useful to business education students for future jobs. Future studies can replicate this study by including other employability skills not in this study that may be relevant to business education graduates. Despite these limitations, the present study makes important contributions to knowledge and the findings may apply to other students who are not in business education in Nigeria and other countries.

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