



LAW HUB DEVELOPMENT AND ADVOCACY CENTRE

YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

Leveraging on Technology to enhance Youth Employability in South-East Nigeria

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Foreword

With one of the largest youth populations in the world, Nigeria’s future prosperity will be determined largely by how effectively it equips young people with the skills, opportunities, and enabling environment required to thrive in a rapidly changing global economy. In the South-East geopolitical zone, renowned for its entrepreneurial spirit, resilience, and educational attainment, this challenge is both urgent and full of promise.

This report, **“Leveraging Technology to Enhance Youth Employability in South-East Nigeria,”** provides a timely and evidence-based examination of the factors shaping youth employment outcomes in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States. The research reveals that youth unemployment is not merely a consequence of limited job availability but a manifestation of systemic misalignments between education systems, labour market demands, and the realities of technological transformation. At the same time, it highlights emerging opportunities, particularly in the digital economy, remote work, and technology-enabled entrepreneurship, that, if properly harnessed, could redefine employment pathways for millions of young people. Importantly, this study elevates the voices of youths, policymakers, and practitioners, grounding its analysis in lived experiences and institutional realities. By doing so, it provides practical insights for government actors, development partners, private sector stakeholders, and civil society organisations seeking to design more responsive, inclusive, and future-oriented youth employment interventions.

This report is not intended to be an end in itself, but a catalyst for action. Its recommendations call for deliberate investment in digital inclusion, stronger coordination across skills development institutions, gender- and disability-responsive programming, and policies that bridge the rural–urban divide. Above all, it underscores the necessity of placing technology at the centre of youth employability strategies, while ensuring that no young person is excluded from the opportunities it creates. We hope that this publication will contribute meaningfully to policy dialogue, program design, and collaborative action aimed at transforming the South-East into a hub of digital productivity, innovation, and inclusive growth.

Signed

Osita Okoro
Executive Director

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Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of youth employability in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States, examining how digital access, behavioural readiness, institutional coordination, and structural barriers shape employment outcomes in the region. Drawing from extensive quantitative data and rich qualitative insights, the study reveals that while the Southeast holds strong potential due to its high literacy rates, vibrant entrepreneurial culture, and growing youth demographics, major constraints hinder the translation of this potential into sustainable economic opportunities.

Findings highlight that youth across the three states face interconnected challenges including limited digital device ownership, high internet costs, infrastructural deficits, and uneven rural–urban access to technology. More than half of respondents described the internet as unaffordable or very unaffordable, underscoring the economic barriers that restrict digital participation. These constraints are compounded by educational misalignments—where many youths possess formal qualifications but lack market-relevant digital and technical skills demanded by today’s labour market.

Behavioural factors further shape employability outcomes. Interviews with stakeholders reveal persistent issues of low persistence, unrealistic expectations, and limited exposure to workplace norms. Many young people still anchor their aspirations on white-collar jobs, demonstrating the need for stronger mindset reshaping and entrepreneurship-oriented programming. Despite these limitations, significant opportunities remain. The expanding digital economy, the global rise in remote work, and existing state-led skills acquisition programs—such as the Renewed Hope Employment Initiative and community-based training schemes—provide entry points for improving youth employability.

Institutional interviews emphasize the need for greater collaboration between government, private sector actors, and civil society. Current programs often operate in silos, limiting their scale and sustainability. Respondents stress the importance of coherent digital inclusion strategies, reforms in educational systems, and targeted investments in youth-focused initiatives. Strengthening partnerships is seen as essential to unlocking the region’s full economic potential, especially as digital technologies reshape global employment landscapes.

Overall, the report concludes that youth unemployment in the Southeast is not merely a labour market problem but a systemic challenge requiring coordinated action. A bold, inclusive, and technology-driven agenda is necessary to transform youth from job seekers into innovative contributors to the regional economy. Achieving this transformation will require universal digital inclusion, gender- and disability-responsive programming, strengthened rural access, and a governance structure that aligns public and private efforts toward shared outcomes.

Introduction

Background

Globally, youth employability has become a defining policy challenge of the 21st century. The International Labour Organization estimates that more than 73 million young people are unemployed worldwide, while about 267 million are not in employment, education, or training (NEET)¹. This reflects a major waste of human capital in an era dominated by innovation, digital transformation, and knowledge-driven economies. Youth unemployment rates remain three times higher than adult rates, indicating systemic barriers to inclusion in the labour market.

The world of work is evolving rapidly under the influence of globalization, technological advancement, and automation, collectively referred to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Traditional labour-intensive sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing are shrinking in capacity, while the service and technology sectors demand new competencies — digital literacy, communication, problem-solving, and adaptability that are often lacking among young workers². Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the youth population represents both a demographic dividend and a potential source of instability. Over 60% of Africa's population is below 25 years of age, making it the youngest region globally³. Yet, African Development Bank reports that only about 3 million formal jobs are created annually, against 10–12 million young people entering the workforce each year. Consequently, most youth survive through informal or precarious employment.

Youth employability has emerged as a central policy concern across the Global South, especially in countries like Nigeria where demographic expansion and economic volatility intersect. Nigeria's youth population—estimated at over 70 million between the ages of 15 and 35—constitutes both a potential demographic dividend and a policy challenge. According to the National Bureau of Statistics⁴, the youth unemployment rate stands at 33.3%, while

¹ International Labour Organization (ILO) (2023). *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2023: Investing in Transforming Futures for Young People*. Geneva: ILO.

² World Bank (2022). *Nigeria Development Update: The Continuing Urgency of Business Unusual*. Washington DC: World Bank. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099740006132214750>

³ African Development Bank (AfDB) (2022). *Jobs for Youth in Africa Strategy (2016–2025): Progress Update*. Abidjan: AfDB. <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/bank-group-strategy-for-jobs-for-youth-in-africa-2016-2025-89238>

⁴ National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2024). *Labour Force Survey Q2 2024*. Abuja: NBS. <https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/elibrary/read/1241594>

underemployment exceeds 20%. This implies that nearly one in every two young Nigerians is either unemployed or engaged in precarious, low-paying, or informal jobs.

The challenge of youth employability transcends the problem of job availability. It reflects a mismatch between the skills supplied by the educational system and those demanded by the labour market. Employers in both formal and informal sectors consistently report deficits in soft skills, technical proficiency, and digital literacy among graduates⁵. In addition, the informal sector—which accounts for nearly 80% of employment in Nigeria—absorbs the majority of young workers but offers little in terms of social protection, income stability, or upward mobility. Globally, youth employability has been recognized as an essential element of sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and 8) emphasize quality education, decent work, and economic growth as pathways to empowering young people. Similarly, the African Union’s Agenda 2063 underscores the importance of harnessing Africa’s demographic dividend through investments in youth education, skills development, and entrepreneurship. Nigeria’s National Youth Policy (2019–2024) and the Youth Employment Action Plan (2021–2024) align with these frameworks, prioritizing employability, entrepreneurship, and innovation.

However, persistent challenges which include limited access to employability-enhancing programs, weak vocational education systems, limited industry-academia collaboration, and gender disparities—continue to impede progress. The need for a comprehensive, multisectoral, and evidence-based approach to youth employability is therefore urgent.

Problem Statement

The youth employability crisis in Nigeria is multifaceted. At its core lies the skills gap—a structural disconnect between the education system and labour market realities. Higher institutions, technical colleges, and vocational training centers often operate without close collaboration with industries, resulting in graduates who are theoretically sound but practically ill-equipped.

Secondly, there is limited access to work-based learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs. Even when available, these programs are concentrated in urban areas and exclude marginalized groups such as young women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and rural youth.

⁵ International Labour Organization (2023): World Employment and Social Outlook.
https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40inst/documents/publication/wcms_865332.pdf

Thirdly, labour market information systems remain fragmented, making it difficult for young people to access information about available jobs, skill requirements, and career progression opportunities. This contributes to frustration, prolonged job searches, and increased vulnerability to social vices such as migration, crime, and substance abuse.

Moreover, macroeconomic constraints—including low industrial productivity, limited foreign investment, and weak job creation capacity—mean that even employable youths face limited opportunities. The rise of automation and the digital economy have also created new skill demands that the current education system is ill-prepared to meet.

Lastly, the gender dimension of employability remains underexplored. Female youth face higher barriers due to cultural norms, safety concerns, and discriminatory hiring practices. Without deliberate interventions, the gap in employment outcomes between men and women will persist, undermining the inclusivity of national development.

Literature Review

Overview

Youth employability has emerged as a global development priority, particularly in the face of rising youth unemployment, rapid technological change, and persistent education–labor market mismatches. As nations contend with transforming economies and evolving job landscapes, ensuring that young people possess the skills, capabilities, and opportunities to thrive in the workforce has become both a social and economic imperative. This literature review adopts a funnel approach, beginning with broad international perspectives and theoretical models before narrowing the focus to regional trends in developing contexts, and finally, to the Nigerian experience. The review synthesizes key findings across these levels, highlighting the critical role of vocational training, digital skills, policy alignment, and socio-cultural dynamics in shaping youth employability outcomes.

Global Perspective on Youth Employability

The challenge of youth employability has garnered global attention, driven by persistent youth unemployment, changing labor market demands, and the evolution of work in the digital economy. As economies shift from manufacturing to services and technology-driven sectors, the skills required for sustainable employment are also transforming. This places enormous pressure on education systems, vocational training, and public policies to remain relevant.

The International Labour Organization identifies youth unemployment as one of the most pressing global challenges⁶. It emphasizes that employability should not be reduced to mere job placement but rather understood as a lifelong capability—the ability to gain, retain, and progress in meaningful work overtime. This comprehensive view connects employability to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. Yorke⁷ articulate that employability extends beyond the acquisition of employment; it encompasses the development of transferable skills, self-awareness, and adaptability—attributes that enable individuals to navigate complex, volatile job markets. They stress that

⁶ International Labour Organization. (2023). *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2023*. ILO. <https://www.ilo.org/global>

⁷ Yorke, M. (2006). Employability in higher education: What it is – what it is not. *Learning and Employability Series* 1. Higher Education Academy. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/employability-higher-education-what-it-what-it-not>

employability is not an attribute individuals either possess or lack, but a developmental process that must be nurtured across educational and professional experiences.

Furthermore, global institutions like UNESCO and the World Bank have consistently advocated for education reform that is more responsive to labor market needs. They emphasize lifelong learning, digital literacy, entrepreneurial thinking, and global citizenship as essential pillars for youth employability in the 21st century. However, despite widespread recognition of these needs, significant regional disparities exist in access to employability-enhancing resources. Youth in high-income countries often benefit from structured internships, digital tools, and career services, while their peers in developing countries face under-resourced institutions, limited industrial growth, and constrained access to labor market information.

In sum, global literature portrays youth employability as a multi-dimensional, systemic challenge that requires integrated interventions in education, policy, and economic systems. It is not merely a matter of individual responsibility but a societal imperative requiring collective investment.

Models and Skill-based Frameworks

Understanding youth employability requires a firm grasp of the theoretical frameworks that underpin how employability is conceptualized, measured, and enhanced. Over the years, multiple models have emerged—each offering a different lens on the factors that shape an individual’s ability to gain and maintain employment.

One of the earliest and most influential is the Hillage and Pollard model⁸, which defines employability in terms of four components: “assets” (skills and knowledge), “deployment” (ability to apply those skills), “presentation” (how individuals present themselves to employers), and “context” (external labor market conditions). This framework shifts the narrative away from a purely individualistic view of employability and introduces the importance of environmental and economic constraints. Building on this, Knight and Yorke (2004) proposed the USEM model (Understanding, Skills, Efficacy beliefs, and Metacognition). This model places employability within the context of higher education and lifelong learning, emphasizing not just skill acquisition but the cognitive and reflective abilities needed to apply learning in varied settings. Their approach underscores the importance of metacognition, which is the ability to self-monitor and adapt—which is especially relevant in today’s rapidly evolving job markets.

⁸ Hillage, J., & Pollard, E. (1998). *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis*. Department for Education and Employment. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/15119/1/RR85.pdf>

In more recent years, theoretical models have expanded to account for digital transformation and automation. For instance, Bridgstock highlights the role of career self-management skills—including networking, opportunity recognition, and lifelong learning—as essential for navigating uncertain career paths⁹. Similarly, Suleman emphasizes the growing importance of generic or soft skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and emotional intelligence in enhancing employability in the digital age¹⁰. These frameworks collectively recognize that employability is not a static trait but a dynamic set of competencies developed over time. They also reinforce that both individual agency and structural support are essential for developing effective, inclusive, and context-sensitive employability interventions.

Youth Employability in Developing Context: Africa and LMICs

In many developing contexts, particularly across Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, youth employability is shaped by a unique set of structural, socio-economic, and educational constraints. These regions often experience a "youth bulge", where a disproportionately large segment of the population comprises young people—placing both opportunities and pressures on labor markets, education systems, and governments.

Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, faces what the African Development Bank describes as a paradox: despite having the world's fastest-growing youth population and rising educational enrolments, youth unemployment and underemployment remain alarmingly high¹¹. In Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa, graduates frequently emerge from university systems with credentials that fail to align with labor market realities—a phenomenon often referred to as the "skills mismatch". It has been stressed that this mismatch is due to outdated curricula, insufficient practical learning, and the lack of partnerships between industry and academia¹². Public universities and TVET institutions often operate with minimal input from employers, resulting in students who may have theoretical knowledge but lack the practical and entrepreneurial skills needed for economic participation.

Further compounding this challenge is the limited capacity of formal employment sectors to absorb new entrants. The informal economy—characterized by low wages, job insecurity, and

⁹ Bridgstock, R. (2009). The graduate attributes we've overlooked: Enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(1), 31–44.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360802444347>

¹⁰ Suleman, F. (2017). The employability skills of higher education graduates: Insights into conceptual frameworks and methodological options. *Higher Education*, 76, 263–278. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0207-0>

¹¹ African Development Bank. (2021). *Jobs for Youth in Africa Strategy 2016–2025*. AfDB. <https://www.afdb.org/en>

¹² Oketch, M., McCowan, T., & Schendel, R. (2014). The Impact of Tertiary Education on Development: A Rigorous Literature Review, Department for International Development. <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/0/PDF%20reviews%20and%20summaries/Tertiary%20education%202014%20Oketch%20report.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-161044-887>

lack of social protection—often becomes the default employment space for youth. Yet, few employability interventions are designed to support success in these informal contexts. Regional initiatives such as Skills for Youth Employment (SkYE) and the African Union’s Continental Education Strategy have emphasized the need for TVET reforms, entrepreneurship education, and digital literacy as strategic responses. However, implementation has been uneven, often due to budget constraints, political turnover, and fragmented policy environments.

Ultimately, the literature suggests that in developing countries, employability is not just an education issue, but a multi-sectoral development challenge that intersects with infrastructure, policy coherence, digital access, and macroeconomic stability.

Youth Employability in Nigeria: Structures, Skills, and Systemic Gap

Nigeria provides a rich and complex case for understanding youth employability in the Global South. With over 60% of its population under the age of 30, Nigeria possesses significant demographic potential. However, this so-called “youth dividend” is severely underutilized due to a combination of structural unemployment, educational inadequacies, and institutional weaknesses. According to recent National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reports, youth unemployment and underemployment have hovered above 40% in the last decade—despite the country’s steady educational expansion¹³.

Vocational and technical education have been widely promoted as viable strategies for improving youth employability, particularly for those who may not pursue formal tertiary education. Studies such as Omang et al. (2025) underscore the effectiveness of vocational programs in fields like catering, carpentry, and fashion design in Cross River State, where trained youth reportedly achieved better self-employment outcomes than their untrained peers. Yet, vocational education in Nigeria suffers from low public perception. Olaniyan argues that the mass media often frame vocational paths as inferior, using terms like “apprenticeship” in ways that devalue the associated skills¹⁴. This cultural devaluation leads to reduced enrollment in vocational training centers, despite high labor market demand for technical trades. Further complicating this issue is the underfunding of TVET institutions, many of which lack up-to-date tools, curricula, and qualified instructors. As a result, even when

¹³ National Bureau of Statistics (2023): Nigeria Labour Force Survey Q2 2023.

<https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/elibrary/read/1241429>

¹⁴ Olaniyan, Y. D. (2025). Vocational education and employability in Nigerian media discourse: A critical review. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 15(2), 156–171.

<https://www.emerald.com/heswbl/article/doi/10.1108/HESWBL-05-2025-0182/1304432>

youth engage in vocational training, their skills may not meet industry standards, limiting their employability and earnings potential.

Given the limited capacity of the formal sector to absorb Nigeria's youth labour force, entrepreneurship education has gained traction as a strategy for promoting self-employment. Giami and Emeni highlight the importance of embedding entrepreneurship into tertiary education, not just as a theoretical subject but through practical, innovation-driven curricula that teach business planning, digital marketing, and financial literacy¹⁵. Supporting this, Kolajo et al. argue for transformative curriculum reform beginning at the secondary school level, asserting that early exposure to entrepreneurial thinking fosters initiative, creativity, and risk-taking which are essential for job creation in an economy with scarce employment¹⁶. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship education faces implementation challenges. Many instructors lack business experience, and student projects are often poorly funded or disconnected from real market opportunities. Furthermore, youth-led startups often face barriers to credit, licensing, and mentoring, highlighting a gap between education and the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

As Nigeria's economy becomes increasingly digital, ICT skills have emerged as a core dimension of employability. However, access to digital training remains unequal. Ismail and Diala, studying Ibadan North, found that many youths lacked exposure to basic digital tools such as word processing, spreadsheet software, or online job platforms—despite the proliferation of smartphones and internet cafes¹⁷. This digital divide is particularly pronounced along rural–urban lines and along gendered lines. In many communities, young women face additional constraints such as limited mobility and socio-cultural norms that restrict access to ICT training. Mariette et al. note that these digital exclusions compound existing inequalities and reduce competitiveness in modern labor markets¹⁸. To bridge this gap, NGOs and state governments have initiated programs to provide digital upskilling and coding bootcamps, but these remain limited in reach and scalability. National ICT policy lacks strong alignment with employability initiatives, leading to fragmented and unsustainable programming.

¹⁵ Giami, C. B. N., & Emeni, J. E. (2025). Entrepreneurship education as a tool for reducing youth unemployment in Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Management and Policy Studies*, 5(1), 68–82.

<https://journals.iempsglobal.org/index.php/IJEMPS/article/view/69>

¹⁶ Kolajo, B. F., Ogunbode, O. O., & Adigun, A. O. (2025). Transforming secondary education curriculum for employment readiness in Southwest Nigeria. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5360973

¹⁷ Ismail, T. O., & Diala, A. O. (2025). Digitalization and employability in Ibadan North: A sociological analysis. *Nightingale International Journal of Humanities and Social Research*, 3(2), 40–55.

<https://nightingalepublications.com/index.php/nijhcsr/article/view/321>

¹⁸ Mariette, L., Kamau, J., & Adebayo, O. (2025). Digital skill training and informal employability: Evidence from youth in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Academia.edu*. <https://www.academia.edu/download/122821709/292.pdf>

Furthermore, in recognition of the limitations of formal education, there is growing interest in non-formal and community-based learning as vehicles for improving youth employability. There have been advocacies targeting the need to scale of non-formal education centers targeting out-of-school youth, particularly in the northern states where school dropout rates are highest¹⁹. These centers focus on functional literacy, numeracy, and entrepreneurial skills, often tied to community development projects or income-generating activities. Evidence suggests that such programs are more responsive to local labor demands, though they often suffer from low funding, lack of certification recognition, and minimal policy integration with national education strategies.

Finally, multiple studies point to the macro-structural constraints that undermine youth employability efforts in Nigeria. In a study by Salami et al, they argued that economic globalization has created a labour market skewed in favor of foreign capital and elite labor, while excluding large swathes of semi-skilled youth²⁰. Moreover, policies around foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade liberalization have not translated into youth employment due to weak industrial policies and jobless growth. Another study²¹ proposed that career education be introduced as early as primary school, enabling children to link schooling with future work opportunities. Meanwhile, Okeyika et al²² evaluate federal apprenticeship schemes in South-South Nigeria, noting that while these programs have potential, they often fall short due to corruption, poor monitoring, and limited employer participation.

Summary

The reviewed literature provides a comprehensive understanding of youth employability from global, regional, and national perspectives, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the issue and the importance of context-specific solutions. While existing studies offer valuable insights into the skills gap, educational reforms, and structural barriers affecting young people's

¹⁹ Uba, M. M., Madaki, T. A., & Kwalli, A. S. (2025). Non-formal education and youth empowerment in Northern Nigeria. In *Educational Thoughts, Policy, and Practice: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Vol. 2, pp. 280–295). EduJournal Chapters. <https://edujournalchapters.com.ng/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/EDUCATIONAL-THOUGHTS-POLICY-AND-PRACTICE-A-MULTI-DISCIPLINARY-APPROACH-VOL.2-2.pdf#page=280>

²⁰ Salami, L. A., Ibrahim, A. R., & Tijani, M. B. (2025). Globalization and unemployment in Nigeria: Policy implications for inclusive economic development. *ResearchGate Working Paper*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/396196000>

²¹ Udom, R. A., Okoro, M. I., & Eze, C. N. (2025). Introducing career education in Nigerian primary schools: A policy imperative. *Nigerian Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies Repository*. <https://ir.nilds.gov.ng/handle/123456789/1769>

²² Okeyika, O. K., Uzoechina, B. I., Jegbefumwen, K., Ozulumba, J. I., & Ekwoh, G. A. (2025). Driving youth employability through federal government apprenticeship schemes: The case of South-Southern Nigeria. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 2(2). 105-116. <https://nigerianjournalonline.org/index.php/MJMSS/article/view/368>

employment prospects, significant gaps remain, particularly in measuring the effectiveness of local interventions and understanding how young people in Nigeria navigate these challenges in real-world settings. In light of these gaps, the following section outlines the methodological approach adopted for this study, detailing the research design, data collection methods, and analytical tools used to explore youth employability within the Nigerian context.

Methodology

Overview

This section outlines the methodological approach adopted to investigate youth employability in southeastern Nigeria, with a specific focus on Abia, Anambra, and Imo states. Recognizing the complex and multi-dimensional nature of employability, the study employed a concurrent mixed methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to capture broad patterns and contextual insights simultaneously. The methodology was carefully structured to align with the study's objectives, ensuring both depth and breadth in understanding the factors influencing youth employment outcomes. Details regarding research design, sampling strategy, study location, data collection instruments, and analytical techniques are presented in the subsections that follow.

Research Design

This study adopted a concurrent mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative strategies to gain a comprehensive understanding of youth employability in southeastern Nigeria. Unlike sequential mixed methods, where one form of data collection follows the other, this study collected and analyzed both data types simultaneously. This design allowed for triangulation, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of findings by exploring both numerical trends and contextual insights.

Study Location

The research was conducted across three states in southeastern Nigeria—Abia, Anambra, and Imo. These states were purposively selected based on their relatively high youth populations, active civil society involvement in youth development, and the presence of government agencies engaged in youth employment initiatives. This regional focus enabled the study to capture context-specific dynamics affecting employability in the southeast geopolitical zone.

Population and Sampling

For the quantitative phase, a total of 372 youths participated in the survey. The sampling strategy aimed for an approximately equal distribution across the three states, with 100 respondents targeted from each state. Slight variation in final totals arose due to field realities. Participants were selected using a multi-stage sampling technique, beginning with

purposive selection of urban centers, followed by simple random sampling of eligible youths aged 18–35 within those centers.

The qualitative data consisted of 14 in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted with key stakeholders drawn from government Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) as well as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) actively involved in youth empowerment. The design included five interviews from each state, with an additional four selected based on relevance and availability of key informants. Participants were selected purposively to ensure they held relevant institutional knowledge and had experience in youth employability programs or policymaking.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire, which included both closed and limited open-ended items. The instrument captured demographic information, employment history, perceptions of employability, skill acquisition, and digital access.

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interview guides were used to explore stakeholder perceptions, challenges, and strategies around youth employability in each state. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via virtual platforms, depending on participant preference and accessibility.

All data collection was conducted in accordance with ethical protocols, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were cleaned, coded, and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were computed to identify patterns across the three states. Cross-tabulations were used to compare responses by state, gender, and educational attainment.

Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring ideas and emerging themes. Codes were developed both inductively from the data and deductively based on the study objectives and existing literature. Results were then triangulated with the quantitative findings to produce a robust and nuanced understanding of youth employability trends and barriers.

Limitations of the Study

While every effort was made to ensure methodological rigor and validity, the study was not without limitations, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Firstly, the issue of time constraints posed a significant limitation, particularly in relation to the qualitative data collection. The scheduling of interviews with stakeholders from Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) proved challenging, as many of the intended respondents had limited availability due to professional commitments. This restricted the researcher's ability to follow up with some prospective participants, resulting in a few uncompleted interview appointments.

Secondly, certain respondents—particularly those in high-ranking institutional roles—were hard to reach due to access barriers and administrative gatekeeping. Despite prior communication and formal requests for interviews, a number of targeted individuals declined to participate or were unresponsive, which may have constrained the diversity of institutional perspectives captured in the qualitative phase.

In the quantitative arm of the study, participant attrition due to lack of financial incentives emerged as a notable limitation. Although the study was designed to be voluntary and non-remunerative, some youth respondents expressed reluctance to participate without compensation for their time. In several instances, individuals declined outright when informed that no financial incentives would be provided. This may have led to non-response bias, particularly among youth who may have been unemployed or economically vulnerable—ironically, the very demographic of interest in the study.

While these limitations did not fundamentally compromise the integrity of the research, they do highlight contextual challenges in field-based data collection within the Nigerian environment. These constraints are acknowledged here to provide transparency and to guide future research efforts seeking to engage similar populations.

Data Presentation and Findings

Socio-demographic Data

A total of 372 respondents participated in the research across the 3 states. There were 145 respondents from Imo state, representing 39% of respondents; 124 respondents representing 33% of total respondents from Anambra state, while there were 103 participants representing 28% of total respondents from Abia state. The figure below provides a visualisation of the respondents across the study locations.

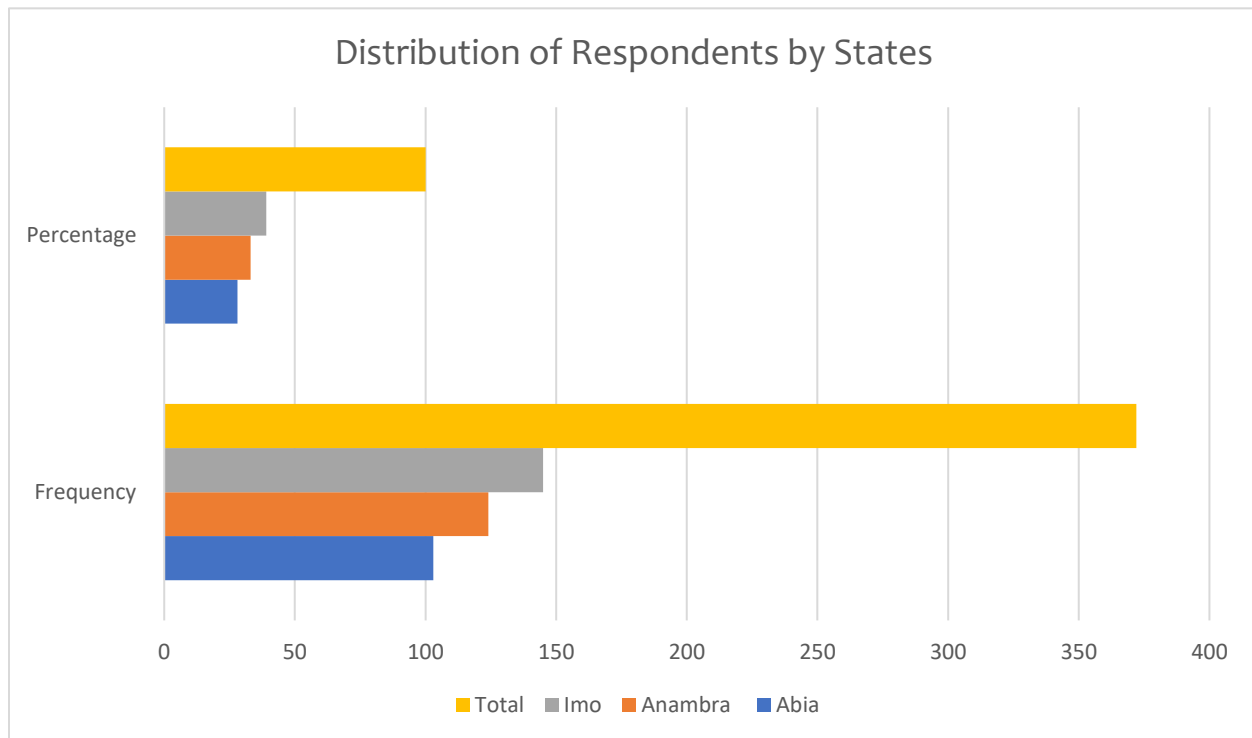


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by state (Source: Fieldwork)

Figure 1 presents the geographic distribution of respondents across the three southeastern Nigerian states—Abia, Anambra, and Imo—which constituted the study area using a 100% stacked bar chart to represent the proportion of total respondents from each state.

The figure reveals that:

- Abia State represents just under one-third of the sample population, consistent with the initial sampling target.

- Anambra State makes up a slightly higher proportion than Abia, suggesting a modest overrepresentation.
- Imo State accounts for the largest share, comprising approximately 40% of the total respondent base.

While the study aimed for an even distribution across the three states, logistical advantages, stronger youth mobilization structures, or improved accessibility in Imo State may have contributed to the higher response rate recorded there. This variation does not undermine the representativeness of the dataset; however, it introduces a need for cautious interpretation of findings when conducting state-level comparisons.

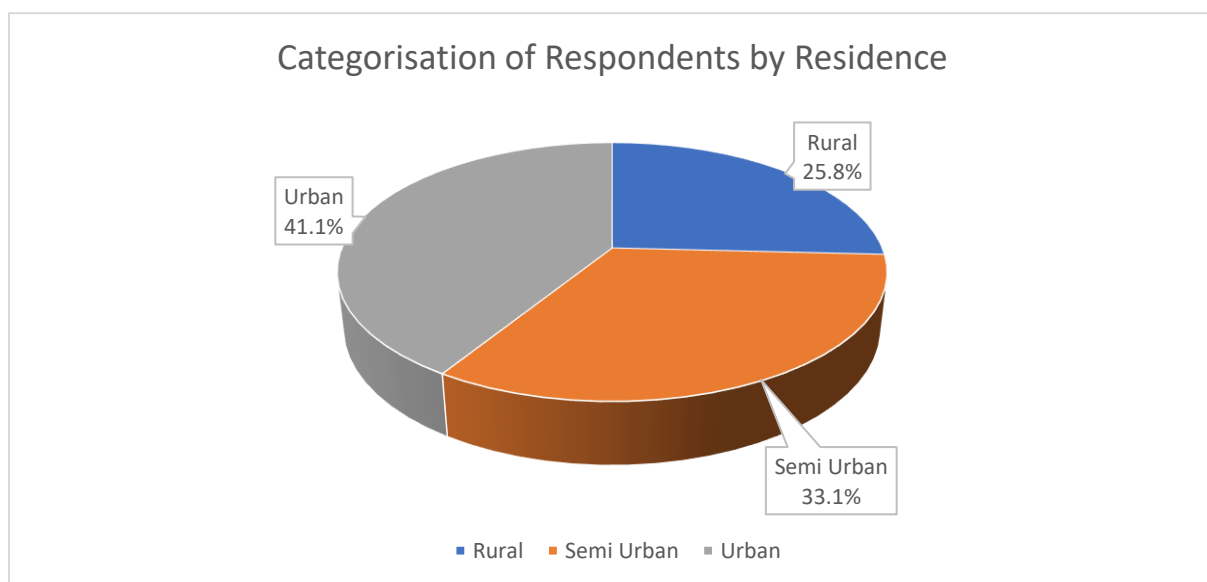


Figure 2. Categorisation of respondents by location (Source: Fieldwork)

The chart above indicates that majority of respondents (41.1%) reside in urban areas, followed by 33.1% in semi-urban areas and 25.8% in rural communities. This distribution reflects a reasonably balanced geographic sampling, while also recognizing the urban-centric concentration of youth populations and employment opportunities in the southeastern region of Nigeria.

The lower rural representation may reflect both demographic realities and access limitations—such as internet connectivity, device availability, and logistical challenges in reaching more remote areas. Nonetheless, the inclusion of nearly one-quarter rural youth ensures that their unique constraints and experiences are captured in the analysis. This

residence-based segmentation is crucial for interpreting digital access, skill acquisition, and employment opportunities—each of which tends to vary significantly with location, especially in terms of infrastructure and institutional presence.

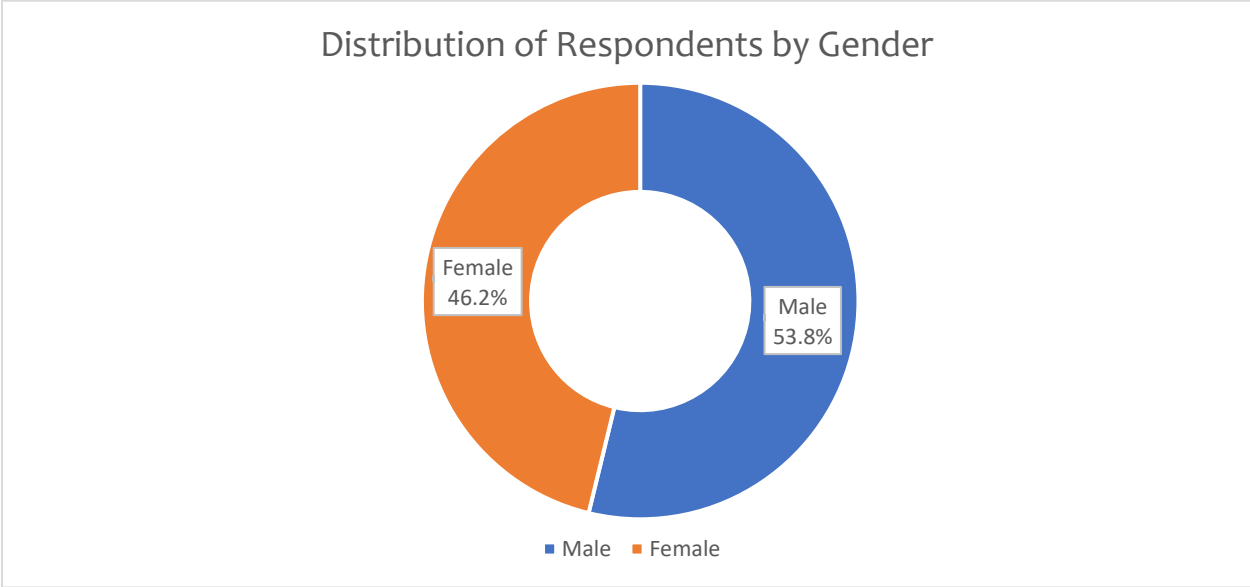


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by gender (Source: Fieldwork)

The data reveals a slightly higher male representation (53.8%) compared to females (46.2%) among the 372 respondents. While the sample reflects a relatively balanced gender spread, the modest underrepresentation of females may stem from socio-cultural dynamics that influence access to education, employment programs, or willingness to participate in research.

Importantly, the gender balance in the study allows for meaningful gender-disaggregated analysis of digital skills acquisition, barriers to employment, and access to resources. It also provides an evidence base for developing gender-responsive policies that address the unique employability needs of both male and female youth in southeastern Nigeria.

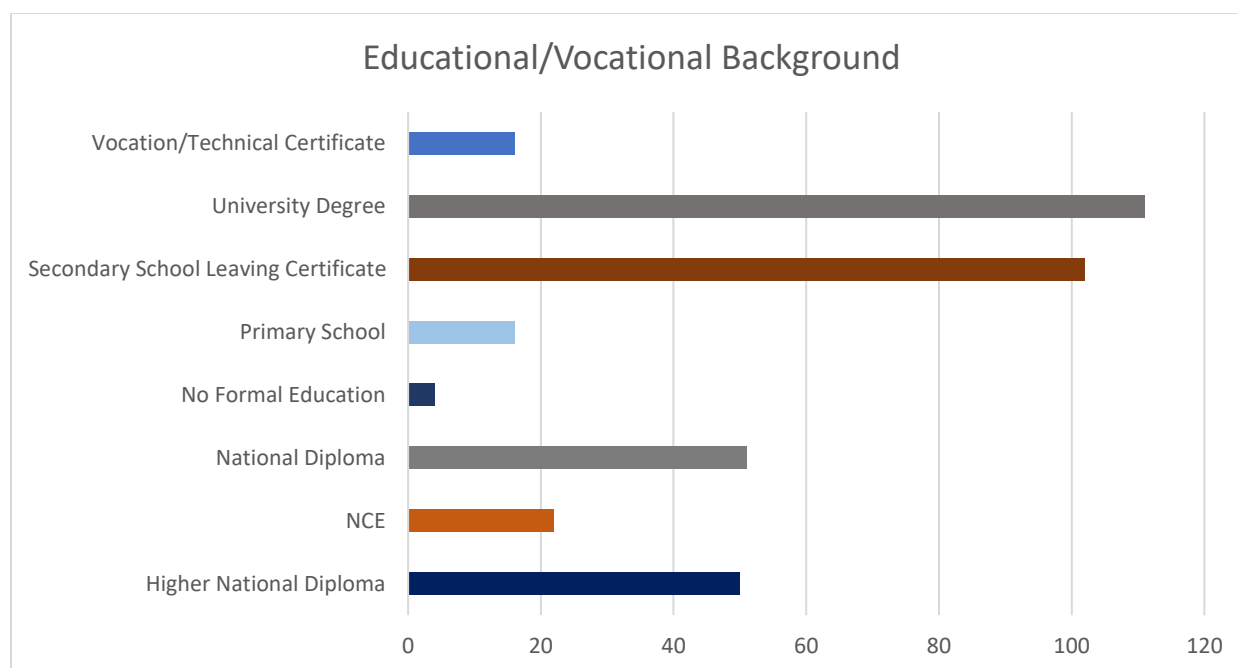


Figure 4. Educational/vocational background of respondents (Source: Fieldwork)

The educational background of youth participants reveals a generally high level of formal education within the study population. The majority of respondents reported having attained qualifications at the secondary or tertiary level, indicating that access to education is not a significant limitation among this group. Specifically, those with a university degree formed the largest segment, accounting for 29.8% of the respondents, closely followed by those with a secondary school leaving certificate, who represented 27.4%. Combined, these two categories make up over 57% of the sample, suggesting that a substantial proportion of the youth population has attained education levels typically required for entry into formal employment sectors.

In addition to these higher qualifications, respondents also reported a wide range of mid-level and technical educational backgrounds. National Diploma (13.7%) and Higher National Diploma (13.4%) holders formed a significant portion of the cohort, indicating that polytechnic and technical education pathways are well represented. Meanwhile, vocational or technical certificate holders and those with the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) made up 4.3% and 5.9% respectively. These qualifications are particularly relevant for employment in technical trades, education, and certain service industries where specialized practical skills are required.

At the lower end of the education spectrum, 4.3% of respondents reported primary school as their highest level of education, while only 1.1% had no formal education. Although these groups are relatively small, they represent a vulnerable segment of the youth population who may face significant challenges in accessing quality employment, particularly where digital

and literacy skills are prerequisites. Overall, the findings suggest that while educational access appears adequate for the majority of youth, the key challenges may lie in the relevance of education to labor market needs, the quality of instruction, and the availability of post-education transition pathways such as internships and job placements.

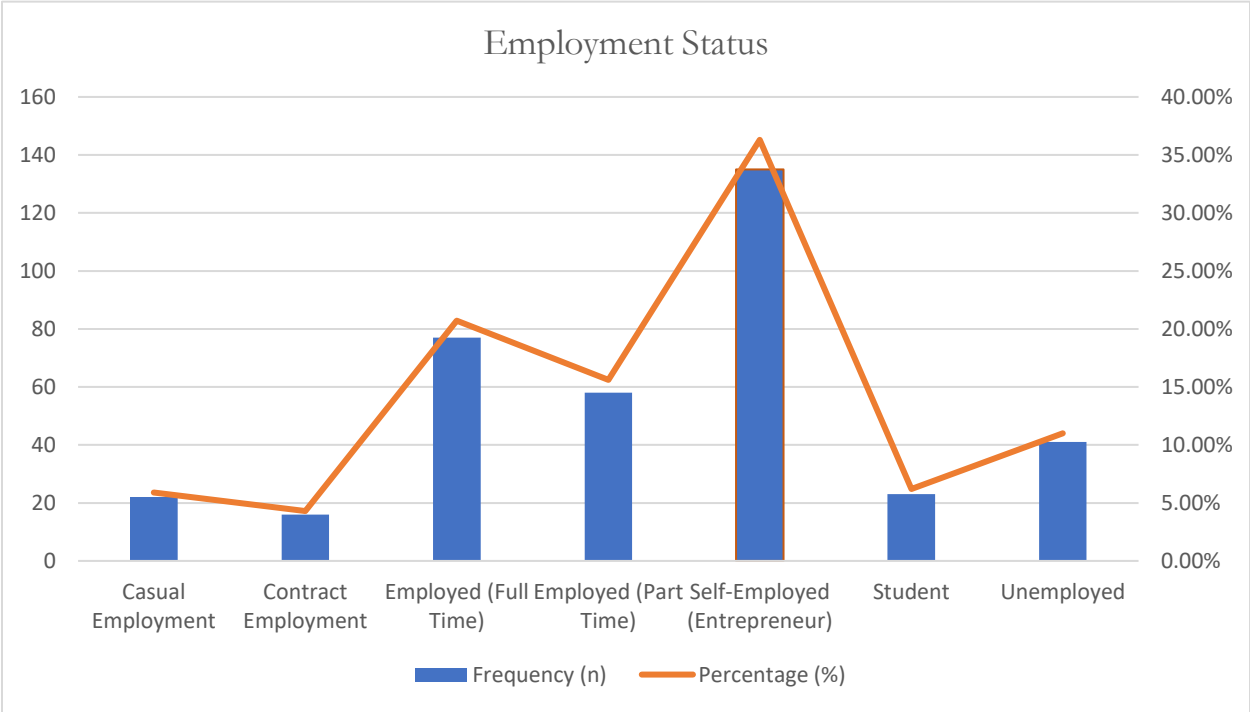


Figure 5. Employment status of respondents (Source: Fieldwork)

The data on employment status reveals important insights into the labor market positioning of youth in the southeastern region of Nigeria. Notably, a substantial portion of respondents, 36.3% identified as self-employed or entrepreneurs, suggesting a high level of youth engagement in informal or small-scale business activities. This may be reflective of a broader economic context in which formal employment opportunities are scarce, prompting young people to pursue entrepreneurial alternatives as a means of income generation.

In contrast, 20.7% of respondents reported being in full-time employment, while another 15.6% indicated they were engaged in part-time work. A smaller fraction of youths—5.9%—held casual employment, and 4.3% reported contract-based roles, highlighting a fragmented and often precarious labor landscape. The presence of multiple employment categories suggests a degree of labor fluidity, with many youths likely navigating between formal, informal, and temporary work arrangements in response to opportunity availability.

Importantly, 11% of respondents reported being unemployed, while 6.2% were students, possibly indicating a transition phase into the labor force. These figures, though relatively modest, still point to gaps in workforce absorption, particularly for graduates and school-leavers. Overall, the data underscore the critical need for targeted interventions that support both youth entrepreneurship and inclusive employment pathways, especially those that bridge the divide between skills training and job placement in both the public and private sectors. See the ‘table’ below for further breakdown.

Internet Access

Access to the internet remains a vital enabler of employability, especially in a digital economy where information, job applications, remote work, and skills development are increasingly conducted online. This study examined the frequency and mode of internet access among youth across Abia, Anambra, and Imo States to understand disparities in digital connectivity.

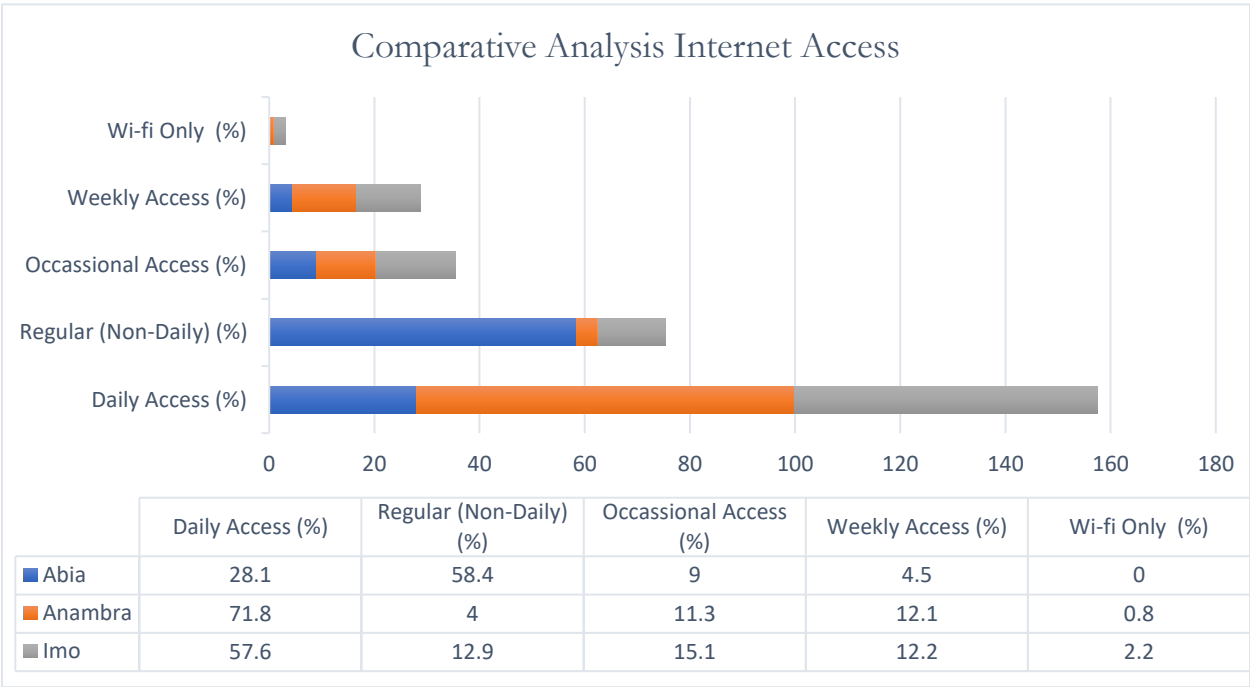


Figure 6. Internet Access of respondents (Source: Fieldwork)

The data reveal stark inter-state variations in internet accessibility. Anambra State leads in daily internet usage, with over 70% of respondents reporting consistent, daily access. This figure is nearly three times that of Abia State, where only 24.3% of youth indicated the same. In Imo State, daily access stands at a moderate 55.2%, placing it between the other two states.

Notably, Abia State also records the highest percentage of respondents with no internet access at 13.6%, a condition completely absent in Anambra. This lack of access represents a significant structural barrier to employability, limiting exposure to online training, digital literacy tools, and job search platforms. Additionally, the relatively higher rates of weekly and monthly access in Abia suggest inconsistent connectivity that may not support sustained digital engagement.

The comparative frequency of access indicates that Anambra youth are better positioned to benefit from digital employability interventions, while youth in Abia may require foundational investments in infrastructure, affordability support, and digital literacy training. These disparities affirm the need for regionally tailored policy responses, ensuring that no group is left behind in the digital workforce transition.

Device Ownership and Access

Access to digital devices is a critical determinant of a young person’s ability to participate in digital learning, apply for jobs online, and engage in tech-driven entrepreneurship. This section examines the types of digital devices youth respondents reported owning or accessing, offering insight into their digital readiness.

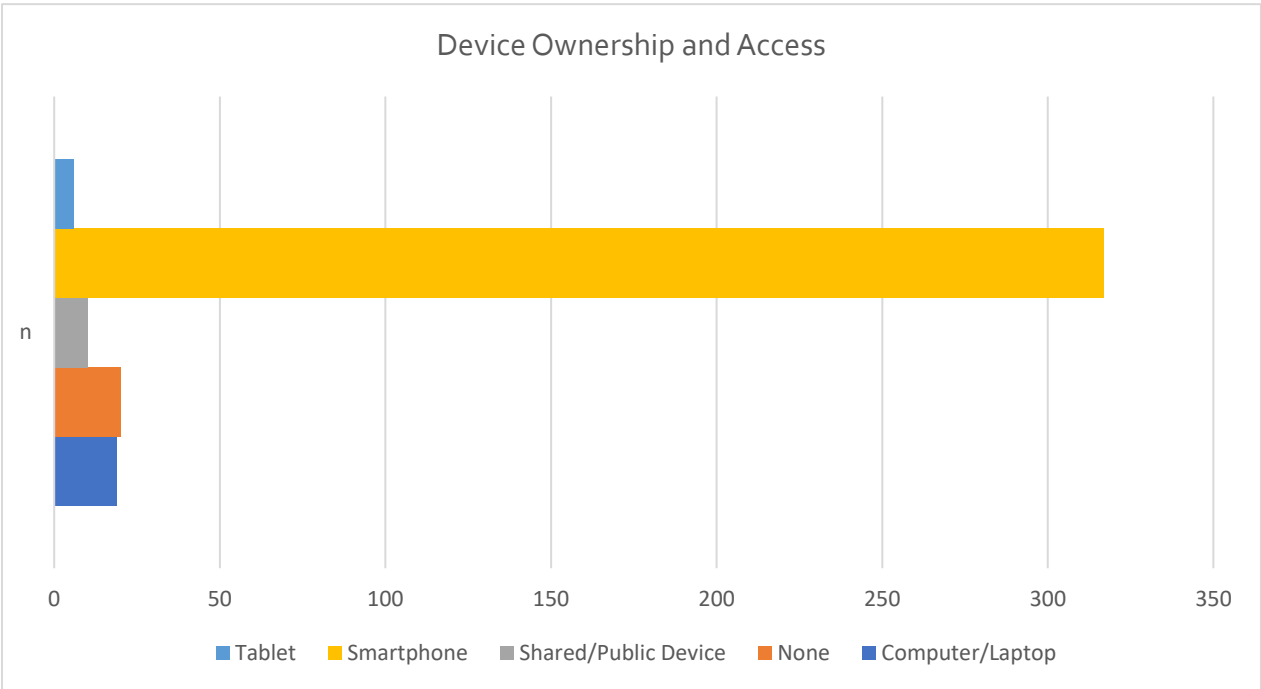


Figure 7. Device Ownership and Access (Source: Fieldwork)

The findings show that smartphones are the overwhelmingly dominant device, with 85.2% of respondents indicating ownership or access. This high rate of smartphone access suggests that mobile technology is the most common—and possibly the most affordable—gateway to the digital world for many young people. However, reliance on smartphones alone may limit the types of digital tasks youth can perform, particularly those requiring productivity software, extensive typing, or data analysis.

In contrast, only 5.1% of respondents reported access to computers or laptops, and a further 2.7% indicated they rely on shared or public devices, such as those found in cybercafés or community centers. A small number (1.6%) reported owning tablets, while 5.4% of respondents indicated they had no access to any digital device. This lack of access presents a significant barrier to digital inclusion and employability, especially in sectors that increasingly depend on ICT skills. The data clearly underscore the need for broader digital infrastructure investment, including affordable access to laptops and digital literacy programs tailored to mobile platforms, to ensure youth are not only connected but also competitively equipped.

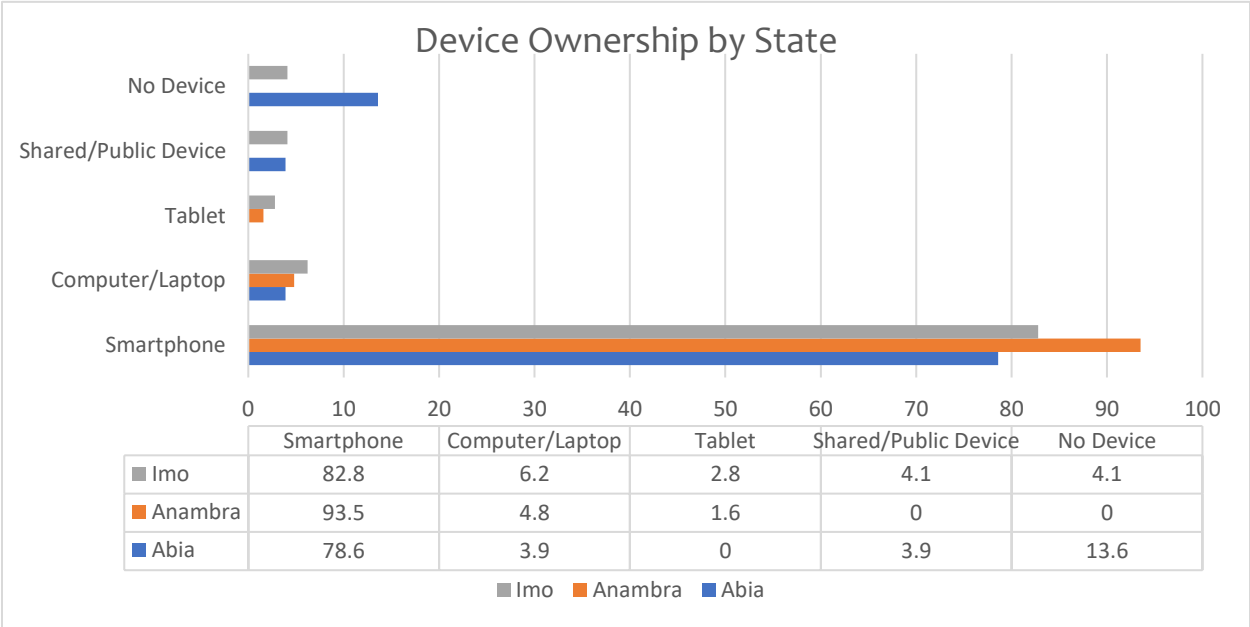


Figure 8. Disaggregation of Device Ownership and Access by State (Source: Fieldwork)

A closer disaggregation of device access by state reveals significant disparities in the digital tools available to youth across Abia, Anambra, and Imo. Smartphones remain the most widely accessible device in all three states, with 93.5% of youth in Anambra, 82.8% in Imo, and 78.6% in Abia reporting ownership or regular access. This high level of smartphone penetration reinforces the mobile-first digital landscape prevalent among Nigerian youth and underscores

the critical role of mobile technology in facilitating access to information, communication, and digital workspaces.

However, the data also highlight variations in digital exclusion, particularly in Abia, where 13.6% of respondents reported having no access to any digital device—a stark contrast to Anambra, where no respondent fell into this category. The relatively low levels of computer/laptop ownership, ranging from 3.9% in Abia to 6.2% in Imo, further emphasize the limitations many youth face in performing complex digital tasks, such as document processing or coding. Similarly, access to shared/public devices was more evident in Abia (3.9%) and Imo (4.1%) but completely absent in Anambra, possibly reflecting better personal ownership rates there. The minimal access to tablets across all three states—ranging from 0% in Abia to just 2.8% in Imo—suggests that these devices are not widely adopted or prioritized. These findings underscore the importance of context-sensitive digital inclusion strategies, particularly for states like Abia where digital inequality remains more pronounced.

Perceived Affordability of Internet

Internet affordability remains a major determinant of digital inclusion and employability, particularly among youth in low- and middle-income regions. The study findings indicate that while a significant number of respondents view internet access as generally within reach, a substantial portion still find it prohibitively expensive.

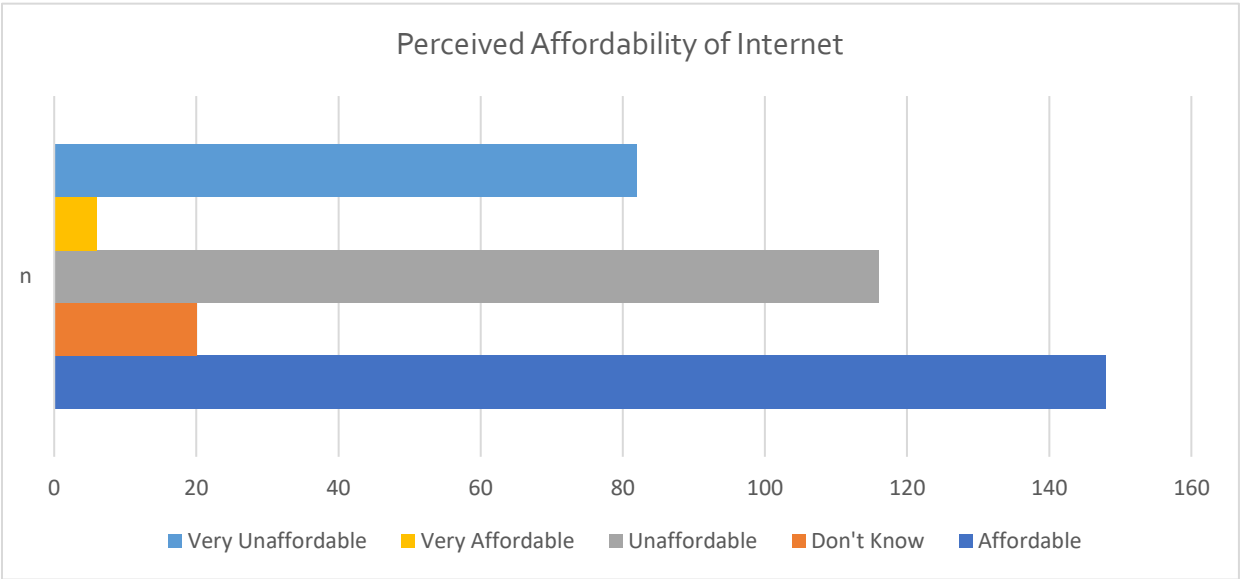


Figure 9. Perceived affordability of internet (Source: Fieldwork)

Overall, 39.8% of respondents described the internet as "affordable", suggesting that a fair proportion of youth are able to consistently pay for data or connectivity, possibly supported

by low-bandwidth platforms or cost-efficient mobile plans. Only 1.6% considered internet services to be "very affordable," pointing to limited access to genuinely low-cost or subsidized digital infrastructure. Conversely, 31.2% of respondents reported that internet access was "unaffordable," and another 22.0% described it as "very unaffordable." These two categories combined represent over 53% of respondents, revealing that more than half of the youth surveyed face serious cost-related barriers to regular internet use. An additional 5.4% were unsure or "didn't know," possibly reflecting inconsistent usage or shared device situations where they are not directly responsible for payment.

This perception of high cost—especially when combined with device limitations—represents a key structural challenge to digital empowerment. While affordability seems to be better in some locations like Anambra (with higher reported daily access and smartphone usage), states such as Abia, where device ownership and internet connectivity were more limited, likely experience more acute affordability concerns. These findings call for state-specific interventions, including youth-focused data subsidy programs, free Wi-Fi zones, and community digital centers, to reduce the economic burden of digital participation and ensure more equitable access to online opportunities. The image below presents the findings from the field.

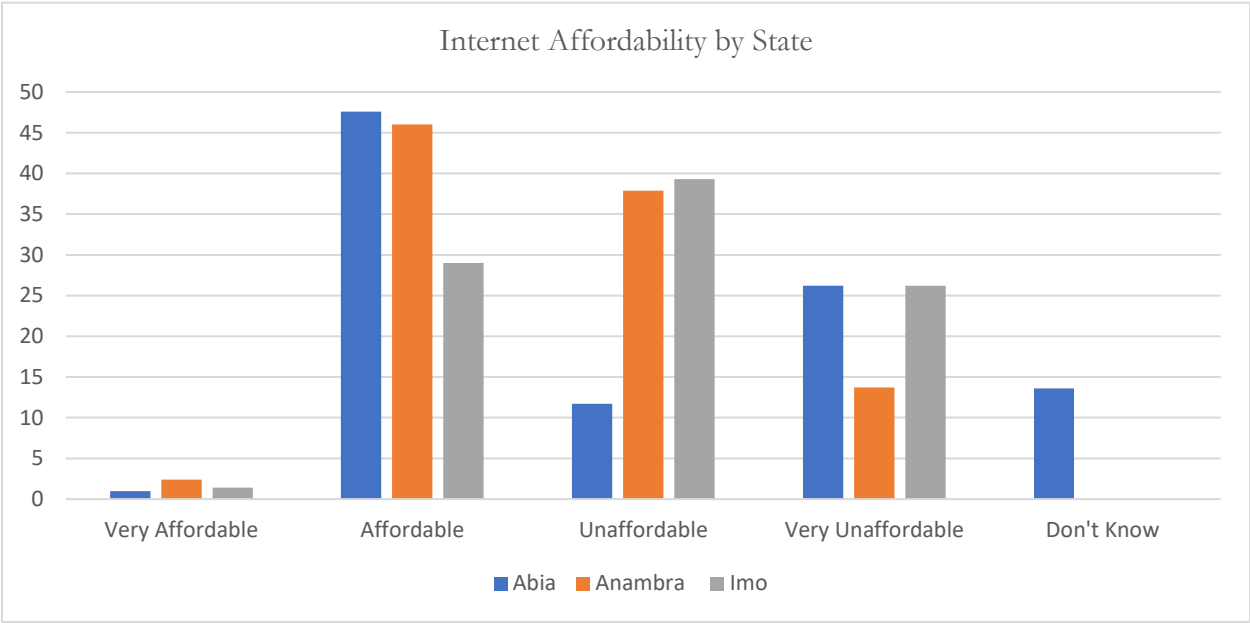


Figure 10. Disaggregation of Perceived Affordability of internet (Source: Fieldwork)

A state-level analysis of internet affordability perceptions among youth reveals notable differences across Abia, Anambra, and Imo States—highlighting the intersection of geography, cost, and digital access.

In Abia State, nearly half of the respondents (47.6%) considered the internet to be affordable, the highest proportion among the three states. However, this seemingly positive perception is contrasted by a significant 26.2% who found the internet very unaffordable, and an additional 11.7% who classified it as unaffordable. Furthermore, 13.6% of Abia respondents indicated uncertainty about affordability ("Don't Know"), which may reflect inconsistent usage patterns, indirect payment models, or lack of personal device ownership. This mixed picture suggests that while some youth in Abia manage to afford internet access, a considerable segment remains economically excluded or uncertain about the sustainability of digital connectivity.

In Anambra State, the perception of affordability was also relatively strong, with 46.0% rating internet access as affordable, and a small 2.4% classifying it as very affordable. Notably, none of the respondents in Anambra selected "Don't Know," suggesting a more stable and informed relationship with internet consumption. However, a substantial 37.9% still rated it as unaffordable, and 13.7% as very unaffordable, indicating that despite better device ownership and daily internet use (as earlier reported), cost remains a barrier for a significant proportion of Anambra's youth.

Imo State presents the most affordability-constrained profile, with only 29.0% of respondents describing the internet as affordable. The majority of respondents found access either unaffordable (39.3%) or very unaffordable (26.2%), pointing to widespread economic barriers to regular internet use. This may help explain why digital engagement in Imo, although higher than Abia in terms of device access, may not always translate into sustained, cost-effective usage. The relatively low proportion of respondents reporting the internet as "very affordable" (1.4%) also underscores the limited penetration of truly low-cost data solutions in the state.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while perceptions of internet affordability are somewhat positive in Abia and Anambra, a significant portion of youth in all three states still struggle with cost-related constraints. State-specific digital subsidy programs, zero-rated platforms for skills development, and the expansion of public access facilities are therefore recommended to promote inclusive and sustainable digital access.

Access to Digital Tools

This section explores whether youth respondents face challenges in accessing digital tools, defined here as software-based resources such as learning platforms, digital education applications, productivity tools, and virtual collaboration systems—rather than physical devices like smartphones or laptops.

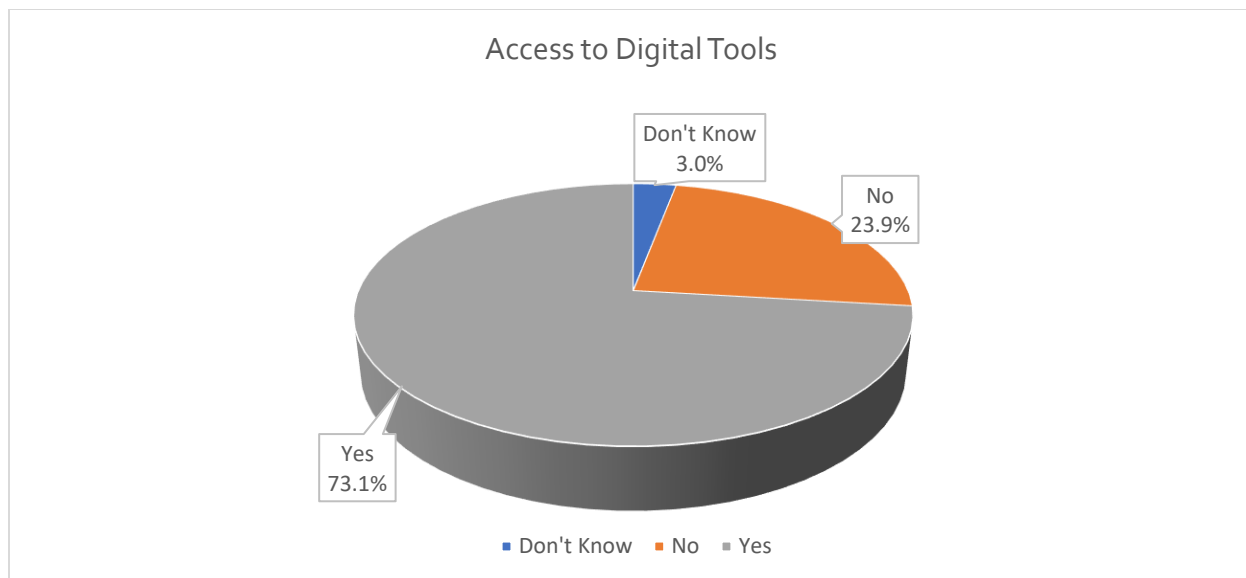


Figure 11. Access to digital tools (Source: Fieldwork)

The results reveal that a substantial 73.1% of respondents (272 out of 372) indicated they experience challenges in accessing such digital tools. This suggests that although many youths may own or have access to internet-enabled devices, their ability to utilize meaningful, skill-building digital resources remains significantly constrained.

Only 23.9% of respondents (89 individuals) reported that they do not face such challenges, highlighting a relatively small segment of youth who are likely to benefit from consistent exposure to structured e-learning platforms or job-readiness applications. Additionally, 3% of respondents (11 individuals) selected “Don’t Know,” which could indicate limited awareness or exposure to formal digital tools, underscoring a potential digital literacy gap. These figures emphasize that access to devices alone is insufficient; without adequate support, awareness, and training on how to use digital learning tools effectively, youth are unlikely to realize the full potential of digital transformation efforts.

Quantitative evidence showed low completion rates in digital training, with respondents citing lack of motivation, pressure, or competing tasks. Qualitative insights clarify that the issue is not a lack of interest but complex behavioural and economic stressors. One youth development specialist explained:

Some of the qualitative respondents pointed at different issues and contributing to the usage of internet and technology and its indelible role on the discourse of youth employability. Their position is presented in the box below:

Box 1. Opinion of Respondents on Internet and Technological Opportunities

“Digital infrastructure is the starting point for any meaningful digital revolution, including youth employability. Without reliable connectivity, devices, or access points, even the most determined young person cannot acquire digital knowledge. What this shows is that digital skills are not just an issue of training but of the environment enabling the youth to learn, practice, and apply these skills in real time.” UID-ICTA-ANB

“If you are technologically advanced and have internet access, you can work for two or three companies from your room. Many unemployed youths do not know this because they haven’t explored how technology has opened global opportunities. The jobs are no longer only in Lagos or Abuja—the internet has made it possible for young people in any location to earn, if they build the competencies required.” UID-NDEAN-ABI

“If a young person is unemployed and has no money, how can they afford data or a good phone? This is not a small issue because without these tools, the digital world becomes completely inaccessible. It creates a cycle where poverty prevents them from gaining the skills that could lift them out of poverty. This is why digital exclusion is one of the biggest silent barriers facing our youths.” UID-NDEAN-Co1

One of the respondents pointed out the divide between rural communities and other developed cities and how the poor internet infrastructure in these communities contributes to limiting opportunities for youths in these places. His position is presented below:

“Rural communities don’t have internet access, and young people often have to migrate just to connect. This means they need extra money, time, and effort before they can even begin learning. Connectivity is not just a technical issue—it is something that directly shapes who gets access to digital skills and who gets left behind.” UID-FH-IMO

“Everything is digital now—trainers register online, and officers inspect the training centers to ensure the equipment is actually there and that training is genuine. This system reduces fraud, improves transparency, and ensures that young people receive real value. It is one of the most effective reforms for improving confidence in training programmes.”

The findings underscore the need for inclusive digital learning ecosystems that go beyond connectivity and hardware provision. To address these challenges, interventions should prioritize the availability, affordability, and user-friendliness of digital learning platforms, particularly in underserved communities. Moreover, digital skills programs must incorporate not only the technical how-to but also guidance on where to find and how to effectively use digital tools for learning, upskilling, and professional development.

Participation in Digital Skills Training

The integration of digital skills into youth development strategies has become essential in equipping young people for the demands of the modern labor market. To assess the extent of exposure to such opportunities, respondents were asked whether they had participated in any digital skills training programs—such as coding, digital marketing, data analysis, or other ICT-based learning—within the past two years.

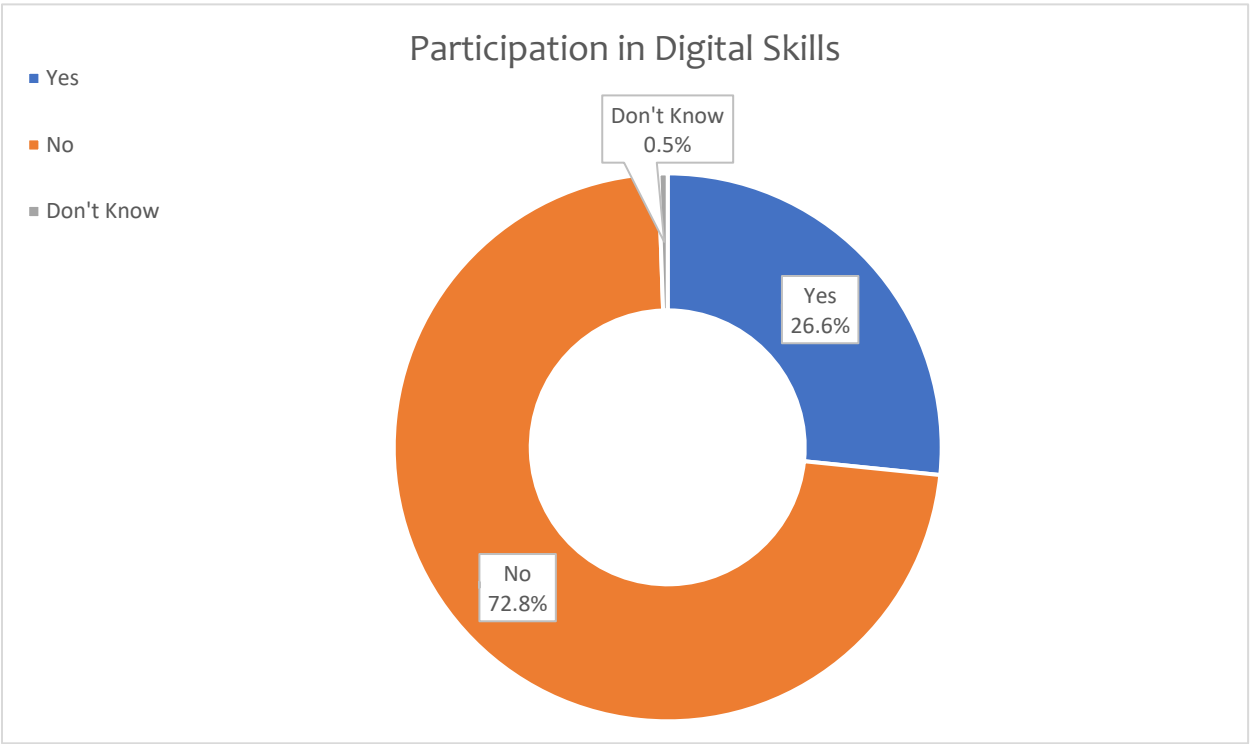


Figure 12. Participation in Digital Skills (Source: Fieldwork)

The findings show that only 99 respondents, representing 26.6% of the total sample, confirmed having participated in any form of digital skills training during this period. In contrast, a significant majority—271 respondents, or 72.8—reported no engagement in such

training. An additional 2 individuals (0.5%) indicated they were unsure, possibly due to a lack of awareness about what qualifies as digital skills training or uncertainty about the nature of programs they may have encountered informally.

This low level of participation highlights a critical gap in digital capacity-building among youth in the region. Despite increasing policy attention to digital transformation and youth empowerment, the findings suggest that access to structured, recognized, and impactful digital training programs remains limited or unevenly distributed. This underlines the need for expanded outreach, improved program visibility, and inclusive delivery models that ensure youth—particularly those in marginalized areas—are aware of, and able to access, relevant digital skill development initiatives.

Building on the general finding that only 26.6% of respondents reported participating in digital skills training within the last two years, a state-level analysis provides further insights into geographic disparities in access and engagement. The data show that Anambra State recorded the highest participation rate, with 34.7% (43 respondents) indicating that they had taken part in digital training programs. This suggests that Anambra may have benefited from stronger implementation of digital inclusion initiatives, better infrastructure, or more active youth development networks offering such opportunities.

In contrast, Abia and Imo States reported significantly lower participation rates, with only 22.3% of respondents in Abia and 22.8% in Imo affirming involvement in digital skills programs. In both states, over 75% of respondents stated that they had not participated in any such training, underscoring a pronounced digital training gap. While Imo had a small proportion (1.4%) of respondents who were unsure whether they had participated, neither Abia nor Anambra recorded any uncertainty in this regard, which may point to clearer awareness or more formalized programs in those states.

These differences across states suggest that access to digital skills training is unevenly distributed and may be influenced by factors such as availability of training centers, state-level policy implementation, outreach effectiveness, and socio-economic barriers. The relatively higher uptake in Anambra offers a model that could inform interventions in Abia and Imo, including targeted investments in youth digital capacity, public-private partnerships, and grassroots mobilization to enhance participation. To close the digital skills gap, interventions must be tailored not only to national priorities but also to regional realities, ensuring that all youth have equitable opportunities to acquire market-relevant digital competencies.

Digital Skills Accessed

Among the subset of youth respondents who reported participation in digital skills training within the past two years (n = 99), further inquiry was made to identify the specific areas of

training they had been exposed to. The findings reveal a clear preference for more accessible, business-oriented digital skills, while technical and data-driven competencies appear to be less common.

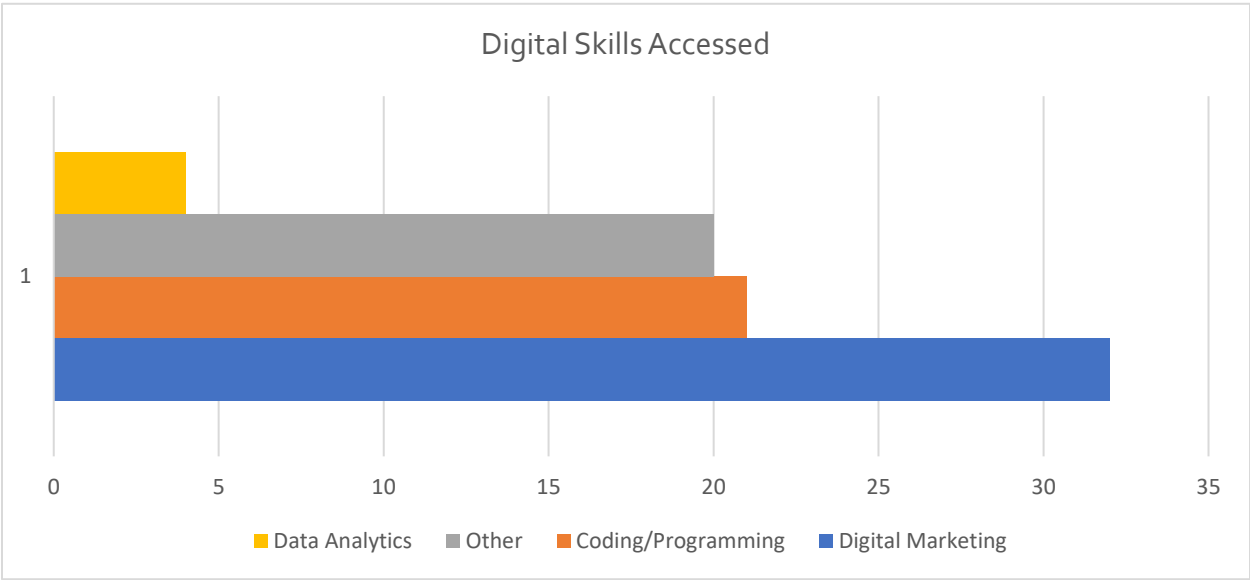


Figure 13. Digital skills accessed (Source: Fieldwork)

The most frequently cited area of training was Digital Marketing, with 32 participants, representing 32.3% of all youth who had undergone digital skills development. This is consistent with broader trends in low-resource settings, where digital marketing is often among the most promoted and accessible skill areas due to its relatively low barrier to entry and relevance for small-scale entrepreneurship. Coding and programming followed with 21 respondents (21.2%), indicating moderate exposure to more technical ICT training, which may be constrained by prerequisite knowledge or limited availability of quality instruction.

Additionally, 20 respondents (20.2%) reported receiving training categorized as "Other", potentially encompassing general digital literacy, content creation, or social media management. Notably, only 4 respondents (4%) indicated training in Data Analytics, highlighting a significant gap in advanced digital competencies that are increasingly demanded in today's data-driven economy. This distribution suggests that while digital engagement is growing, the depth and specialization of digital skill training remain limited, necessitating programmatic efforts to broaden access to higher-value digital competencies, including data science, cybersecurity, and cloud-based tools.

Barriers to Participating in Digital Training

In order to better understand why a large proportion of youth have not participated in digital skills training programs, respondents were asked to indicate the challenges preventing their involvement. The question allowed for multiple responses, reflecting the complex and overlapping nature of the barriers youth face. The findings reveal a mix of economic, informational, structural, and social constraints, with some significantly more pronounced than others.

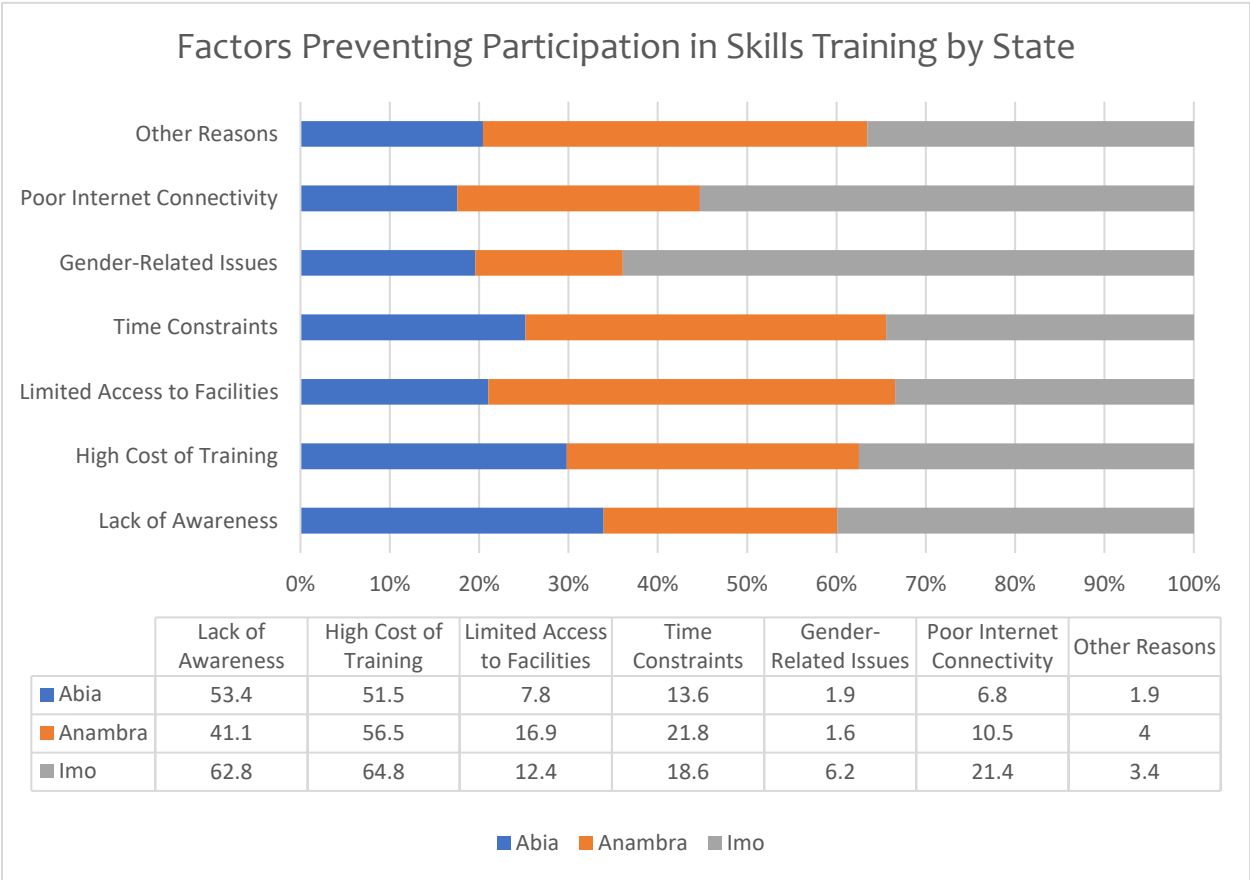


Figure 14. Factors preventing participation in digital training (Source: Fieldwork)

The most frequently cited barrier was high cost, reported by 217 respondents, highlighting the financial burden associated with enrolling in digital training courses—whether in terms of fees, data usage, or device procurement. This was closely followed by lack of awareness at 197 mentions, suggesting that many youths are simply not informed about available opportunities or where to access them. Time constraints were the third most reported issue, with 134 responses, reflecting the challenge of balancing training with existing responsibilities such as work, school, or household duties.

Meanwhile respondents of the qualitative study noted inconsistent training quality largely constitute barriers faced by youths and reduces the propensity for opportunities. An Industrial Training Fund official observed: “Some started learning and dropped out along the way, feeling they already got all the knowledge they need.” (AN-ITF-F).

Other notable barriers included lack of access to training facilities (85 mentions) and poor internet connectivity (51 mentions), both of which emphasize the importance of digital infrastructure and location-sensitive access models. Less commonly reported but still important were gender-related issues (13 responses) and other unspecified constraints (12 responses), which may point to cultural norms, household expectations, or personal confidence gaps.

These findings suggest that any digital training initiative targeting youth must be designed with a multi-dimensional approach—addressing not only affordability but also outreach, flexibility, and infrastructural availability. Special attention should be paid to informational campaigns, subsidized or free programs, and alternative delivery models such as mobile-based microlearning or community-based hubs.

Box 2: Barriers to Participation in Digital Training Faced by Youths

“The first hurdle is willingness. Many young people hide under excuses when deep down the problem is that they are not ready to work hard. Even when funding is available, they still struggle to commit. Hard work and learning demand consistency, and that is where a lot of them fall short.” **UID-FH-Ho3**

“Poor connectivity is very frustrating because it shuts down everything a young person is trying to do. If you want to access the internet and you are in a bad coverage area, you basically cannot work, you cannot learn, you cannot even communicate properly. Everything just stops. That is why I keep saying digital access is not a luxury—it is the foundation of whether a young person can meaningfully participate in the digital world or not.” **UID-ICTA-Eo1**

“We received approval for capital projects, but there will be no funding for the equipment and raw materials needed for training. Without these materials, the youths cannot practice, and training becomes theoretical. This frustrates both learners and trainers and shows how inconsistent funding weakens youth empowerment efforts.”

“The economy is dealing with everybody, and that stress affects young people emotionally. When you are not stable emotionally, you cannot learn. Even if the training is available and free, you won’t be able to focus. This is why I keep emphasizing that emotional stability is part of digital readiness, because the mind must be calm for learning to happen.” **UID-FH-Eo4**

“Many youths still believe that success means getting a white-collar job. They graduate, write CVs, and wait endlessly for a job that may never come. They don’t yet see themselves as people who can create jobs or build something small that grows. This mindset is one of the biggest limitations holding young people down.” **UID-FH-Ho1**

“If someone is unemployed and has no money, how can they afford data or a good phone? Without data or a smartphone, you can’t even start to explore digital opportunities. This is why I say data is life now because without it, young people are cut off from the world where jobs and opportunities now exist.”

“Poor electricity affects small businesses, especially for the youths who sew or run small shops. They cannot be productive when power is unstable. The cost of fuel and generators is too high, and many businesses collapse because they simply cannot afford the running costs. This is why many youths give up on entrepreneurship even after learning a skill.” **UID-NDEAN-Io4**

Perceived Impact of Digital Training Skills

To assess the value of digital skills training among youth who have participated in such programs, respondents were asked whether they found the training impactful. This question provides insight into not just participation levels, but also the quality and relevance of the digital training experiences accessed by young people. The responses show a mixed yet telling distribution, with clear implications for program design and delivery going forward.

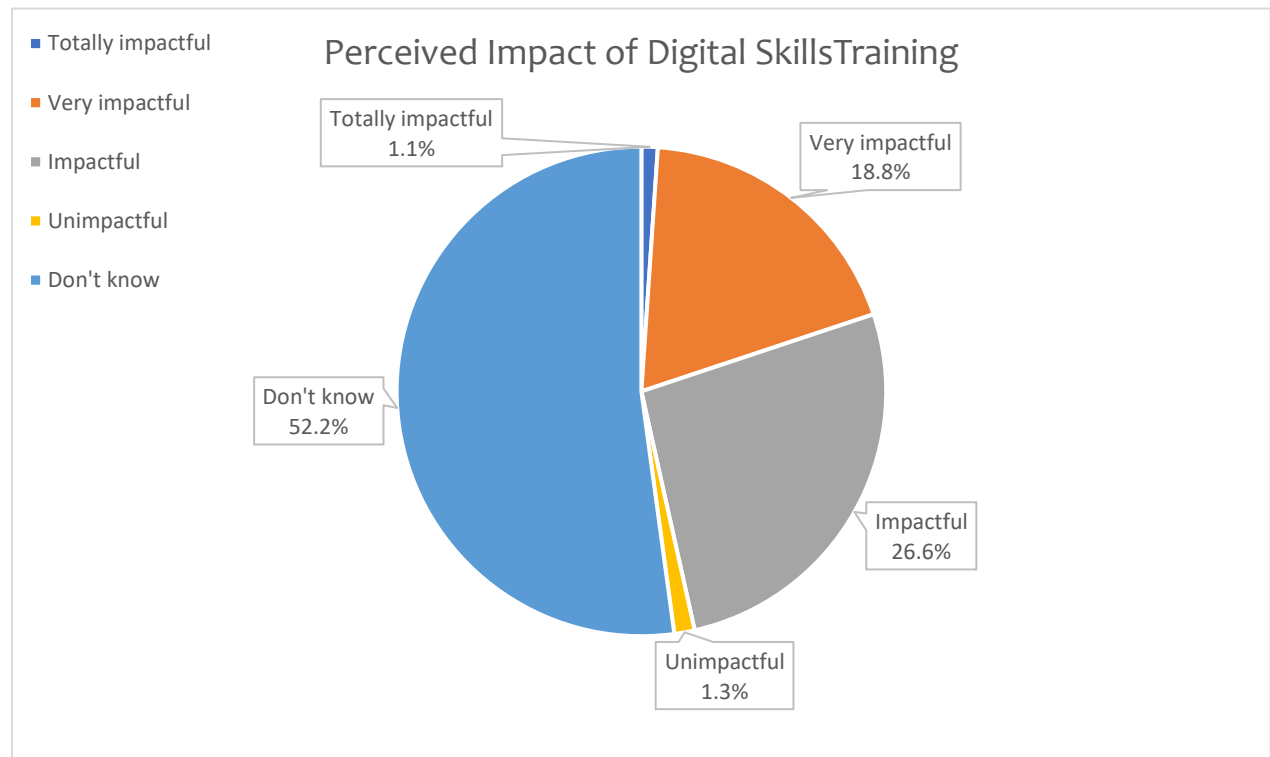


Figure 15. Perceived impact of digital skills training (Source: Fieldwork)

Among the 372 respondents, only 70 individuals (18.8%) considered the training they received to be “very impactful”, while an additional 99 respondents (26.6%) described it as “impactful.” Combined, this means that 45.4% of respondents who participated in training found the experience to be positively meaningful, suggesting that for nearly half of participants, digital training met their expectations or contributed to their skills, confidence, or employment potential.

However, a significant proportion of respondents (194 individuals, 52.2%) selected “Don’t Know,” indicating either lack of participation, poor recall, or unclear program outcomes. This high level of ambiguity highlights potential weaknesses in follow-up, engagement, or evaluation structures within training programs. A small fraction of respondents reported

negative experiences: 5 respondents (1.3%) found the training “unimpactful,” while 4 respondents (1.1%) described it as “totally unimpactful.” Although these figures are low, they suggest that program quality and relevance may vary significantly depending on the provider, curriculum design, or participant readiness. Qualitative interpretation of the conversations with respondents is presented below:

Box 3: Benefits of Technology

“This AI that is here now is already doing many of the jobs people used to do. That is why global tech skills have become more important, the world has moved ahead, and the young person who does not keep up will struggle. AI is not something far away; it is affecting employment now, and those who are smart are already leveraging it to improve their own capacity.” **UID-FH-Fo2**

“Some of these boys doing well are not Yahoo boys at all. Many are doing genuine online businesses—crypto, internet marketing, freelancing. They stay at home, use their laptops and phones, and get paid. It is technology that has opened this possibility, but only those who take time to learn it can benefit.” **UID-NDEAN-Fo3**

“If a young person builds the right digital skills and has internet access, they can work for multiple companies without leaving their room. Remote work has opened doors that many youths are not yet aware of, and those who key into it early can earn more than they would in many physical jobs.” **UID-NDEAN-Ko1**

“Technology is influencing many areas like leatherwork and garment making, and you will see many young women involved in these sectors. Even though these trades may look traditional, technology is changing the tools, the designs, the markets, and the way they do business. Women are adapting quickly, and these sectors could empower many more if well supported.” **UID-MST-Jo3**

“If you are internet-connected and technologically advanced, you can work for two or three companies right from your room. Many unemployed youths don’t know this because they have not explored what technology now makes possible. The jobs of today are not tied to physical locations anymore—technology has expanded the labour market beyond geography.” **UID-NDEAN-Fo1**

Overall, the data suggest that while there is evidence of positive impact among those who participated in digital skills training, a large portion of the youth population either did not participate or was unable to assess the outcome of their engagement. This reinforces the need not only to increase participation rates but also to improve training relevance, delivery methods, and impact measurement, ensuring youth emerge from such programs with tangible, applicable skills.

Discussion of Findings

Overview

The findings of this study present a multi-layered and interconnected set of challenges and opportunities shaping youth employability in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States. While the region boasts a relatively educated youth population, the transition from learning to earning remains difficult for many, particularly in the context of a rapidly shifting digital economy. The discussion that follows provides a nuanced interpretation of the empirical results, enriched with comparative insights from global and regional contexts, and highlights the systemic considerations needed to strengthen youth employability outcomes.

Education-Employment Misalignment in a Changing Economy

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate a persistent disconnect between educational attainment and labour market outcomes among young people in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States. While a significant proportion of respondents reported having completed secondary or tertiary education, this educational achievement has not translated into stable or meaningful employment for many. This misalignment reflects a situation where formal education equips young people with certificates but not necessarily with the practical, market-relevant competencies required by employers or demanded within the evolving economy of the South-East. As a result, many youths remain unemployed, underemployed, or engaged in informal activities that do not match their educational qualifications.

The study further reveals that this mismatch is occurring within the context of a rapidly changing economic landscape. Traditional employment pathways are shrinking, while new forms of work—particularly those driven by technology—are expanding. However, the education and training systems available to many youths in the region have not adapted at the same pace. Respondents and stakeholders consistently highlighted gaps in applied skills, problem-solving ability, communication, and basic digital competence. These gaps make it difficult for young people to transition smoothly from schooling into the workplace, even when opportunities exist.

Importantly, the findings suggest that addressing youth unemployment in the South-East requires more than expanding access to education. There is a clear need to rethink the content, delivery, and orientation of education and training programmes so that they align more closely with labour market realities. Emphasis on experiential learning, practical exposure, and demand-driven skills development is critical if education is to serve as an

effective pathway to employment rather than a source of frustration and unmet expectations.

Behavioural and Motivational Barriers in Youths Transition to Work

Beyond structural and skills-related challenges, the study highlights behavioural and motivational factors as important influences on youth employability outcomes. Qualitative evidence from stakeholder interviews points to recurring concerns about limited persistence, unrealistic expectations regarding employment timelines, and low tolerance for the prolonged effort often required to acquire complex skills. These behavioural patterns affect how young people engage with training opportunities, sustain learning over time, and navigate the realities of job searching or entrepreneurship.

Many respondents expressed a strong desire for immediate income, which in some cases led to disengagement from training programmes perceived as slow to yield financial returns. This tension between short-term survival needs and long-term skills investment is particularly pronounced in contexts of economic hardship, where young people face pressure to contribute to household income. As a result, some youths abandon training prematurely or gravitate toward informal or precarious activities that offer quicker but less sustainable earnings.

The findings underscore the importance of addressing employability as both a technical and behavioural process. Skills development initiatives that do not incorporate mentoring, career guidance, and realistic expectation-setting may struggle to achieve lasting impact. Supporting young people to develop work ethic, resilience, goal orientation, and an understanding of career progression pathways is essential for improving their ability to convert skills into sustained employment or viable self-employment.

Digital Inequality as a Barrier to Inclusive Labour Market Participation

Digital inequality emerged as one of the most significant barriers shaping youth employability across the three states. While access to digital tools and internet connectivity is relatively stronger in some urban centers—particularly in Anambra State—the study reveals substantial disparities across locations and socio-economic groups. Many respondents, especially in rural and peri-urban areas of Abia and Imo States, reported limited access to affordable devices, high data costs, and unreliable internet connectivity. These constraints directly affect their ability to participate in digital skills training, access online information, and engage in technology-enabled work.

The findings indicate that digital access is no longer a complementary asset but a foundational requirement for participation in modern labour markets. Opportunities such as online learning, remote work, digital entrepreneurship, and even access to job information increasingly depend on consistent internet connectivity and basic digital literacy. Youths who lack these resources are systematically excluded from emerging opportunities, regardless of their motivation or educational background.

For instance, the Digital Ambassadors Program (DAP) in Rwanda was a deliberate attempt by the government to drive inclusion of youth from different backgrounds. The project's target was to increase digital literacy for 5 million Rwandans within a space of 7 years²³.

Addressing digital inequality therefore represents a critical entry point for improving employability outcomes in the South-East. The study suggests that interventions must go beyond training alone to address the affordability of data, availability of devices, and reliability of infrastructure. Without deliberate efforts to close these gaps, digital transformation risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than expanding opportunity.

Fragmented Training Ecosystem and Weak Alignment with Market Realities

The study reveals that skills development initiatives in the South-East are characterized by fragmentation and limited coordination. Multiple government agencies, training institutions, and programmes operate simultaneously, yet awareness of these opportunities among young people remains uneven. Many respondents reported limited knowledge of available training programmes, unclear entry requirements, or uncertainty about the value of certifications offered. This fragmentation weakens the overall effectiveness of skills development efforts and limits their contribution to employment outcomes.

Stakeholder interviews further highlighted weak linkages between training providers and employers. In many cases, training curricula are developed without sufficient input from industry actors, resulting in skills that do not align with current labour market demand. Additionally, there are limited mechanisms for tracking graduates, supporting job placement, or providing post-training support. As a result, even when young people complete training programmes, the pathway to employment remains uncertain.

The findings point to the need for stronger institutional coordination and clearer skills-to-jobs pathways. Aligning training programmes with labour market needs, harmonizing standards across providers, and improving information flow to youth are critical steps toward building

²³ Digital Ambassadors Programme (2007 – 2024)

https://www.minict.gov.rw/projects/digital-ambassadors-program?utm_source=chatgpt.com

a more effective employability ecosystem. Without such reforms, skills initiatives are likely to remain isolated interventions with limited systemic impact.

Inclusion of Women and Persons with Disabilities: Progress but not Systemic

While the study reveals meaningful attempts by agencies such as NDE, ITF, and selected NGOs to integrate women and persons with disabilities (PWDs) into training programs, these efforts remain uneven and heavily dependent on institutional will rather than guided by an overarching regional policy. The qualitative data shows pockets of commendable inclusion—such as ITF’s skill programs that accommodated wheelchair users, and NDE’s training modules customized for visually or hearing-impaired learners. These examples demonstrate institutional capability; however, they also highlight a deeper challenge: inclusion is episodic, not systemic.

This pattern mirrors global experiences in settings where inclusion has not been mainstreamed. For instance, Bangladesh’s Skills for Employment Program (SEP) struggled in its early years because PWD inclusion was treated as an optional add-on rather than a structural requirement. It was only after implementing mandatory accessibility standards—ramps, interpreters, multimedia aids—that enrolment and completion rates among women and PWDs increased substantially. Likewise, South Africa’s Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges saw gains in female participation only after adopting gender-sensitive pedagogy and enforcing anti-harassment policies.

In the South-East, the current trajectory suggests that most inclusion efforts lack sustainability because they are not anchored in legislation, funding guarantees, monitoring systems, or performance indicators. Women still face barriers such as device affordability, limited mobility, caregiving burdens, and social norms that discourage digital career paths. PWDs face even steeper challenges: inaccessible facilities, lack of adaptive digital technologies, and absence of tailored learning pathways.

For meaningful change, inclusion must shift from being program-specific to system-wide. The region requires an inclusion framework that spans curriculum design, infrastructure, technology access, recruitment strategies, and monitoring systems. Without structural reforms, the incremental progress observed in some institutions will not translate into regional transformation.

Rural-Urban Disparities and their Implications for Opportunities Structure

The rural–urban divide remains one of the most enduring determinants of youth employability in the South-East. The study documents significant differences in access to digital devices, quality internet connectivity, training centers, and exposure to diverse career opportunities.

Anambra's relatively strong digital penetration contrasts sharply with rural communities in Abia and Imo, where poor infrastructure, limited transportation, and weak connectivity restrict participation in modern economic sectors.

This divide mirrors patterns across Africa and the Global South. In South Africa, youth in rural provinces such as Limpopo consistently report lower digital literacy levels compared to urban areas like Gauteng, resulting in reduced access to technology-enabled jobs. Similarly, in India, rural youths were historically disadvantaged in digital participation until the government launched the National Rural Livelihoods Mission and Digital Village Scheme. These initiatives created community Internet hubs, rural BPO centers, and mobile digital classrooms—dramatically boosting rural youth participation in digital markets.

The Southeast faces a similar risk: if digital and economic investments remain centered in urban capital cities such as Awka and Owerri, rural communities may fall into deeper cycles of unemployment and migration. These disparities do not only affect individuals but also shape regional economic development. Urban-centric growth strategies often lead to weakened rural economies, depopulation, and increased urban congestion. A sustainable approach requires recognizing rural communities as strategic economic zones rather than peripheral beneficiaries.

Ultimately, reducing the rural–urban divide calls for targeted strategies that bring digital and economic infrastructure closer to underserved communities. Without such interventions, rural youths will remain structurally disconnected from the opportunities of the digital economy.

Institutional Fragmentation: Barrier to Scalable Progress

Institutional fragmentation emerged as a recurring constraint across all three states. Although agencies such as NDE, ITF, SMEDAN, State ICT Agencies, and various NGOs offer training programs, these initiatives operate in silos, resulting in duplication, inefficiencies, and limited reach. The absence of a centralized coordination mechanism means that policymaking is reactive rather than strategic, and program design is often provider-driven rather than labour-market-driven.

This institutional silo problem has been documented globally. Nigeria's national assessment of the Youth Employment Agenda (UNDP, 2018) found that fragmentation among MDAs significantly limited national traction on job creation. In Kenya, overlapping mandates between the Ministry of Youth Affairs, Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVETA), and the National Industrial Training Authority (NITA) caused severe coordination gaps until the government introduced a unified skills development framework. Rwanda's success in human capital development has been tied to its central coordination

body—Rwanda Workforce Development Authority—which harmonizes training providers, certification systems, and labour market assessments.

The experience of these countries demonstrates that youth employability thrives where there is institutional coherence, shared strategies, and centralized labour market information systems. The South-East currently lacks such governance mechanisms. Without coordinated planning, budget pooling, and unified monitoring and evaluation, programs will remain small-scale, disjointed, and unable to achieve systemic impact.

The findings suggest that the region requires an institutional reform agenda that includes unified leadership, shared data systems, and coordinated planning. This is pivotal if the South-East is to transition from isolated activities to a robust, labour-market-aligned employability ecosystem.

Technology as a Transformational and Equalizing Force

Across all findings, technology stands out as the single most transformative lever for youth employability. Opportunities in remote work, online services, e-commerce, digital content creation, and virtual assistance are redefining what employment can mean, particularly for young people in emerging markets. Digital work reduces physical barriers, enables global market participation, and offers flexible earning paths for those unable to access traditional jobs.

International experiences strongly affirm this trajectory. The Philippines transformed its economy through deliberate investment in digital skills and remote work infrastructure, becoming a global hub for business process outsourcing and employing millions of young people. India's digital revolution—spearheaded through Aadhaar-linked digital identity, low-cost internet via Jio, and a vibrant tech ecosystem—enabled young people, including those in rural areas, to participate in global gig markets. In Kenya, the Ajira Digital Program demonstrated that rural youths could earn meaningful incomes through online freelancing and microtasks once provided with adequate training and connectivity.

For the South-East, the digital economy offers unprecedented potential. The region's high literacy rates, entrepreneurial culture, and growing youth population provide a strong foundation. However, this potential cannot be realized unless digital inclusion becomes universal, training evolves toward advanced digital competencies, and infrastructure is systematically expanded.

The study's findings show that digital work is not only a new opportunity but a necessary strategic focus. Future employability interventions must position technology at the center of economic development strategies.

Summary

The findings of this study, interpreted through global and regional lenses, reveal that youth employability challenges in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States are deeply structural but fundamentally solvable. The evidence points to a constellation of interconnected constraints—ranging from behavioural readiness to digital access, and from fragmented institutional coordination to entrenched rural–urban divides. At the same time, the study identifies extraordinary opportunities in the expanding digital economy, the rising global demand for remote talent, and the region’s inherent strengths: literacy, creativity, resilience, and demographic vitality.

A compelling conclusion emerges: the South-East is at a developmental crossroads. The region can continue on its current path—where youth initiatives remain fragmented, digital inequality widens, and behavioural barriers persist—or it can pursue a bold transformation anchored in digital empowerment, institutional coherence, and inclusive human capital development. The latter pathway requires a paradigm shift: youth employability should no longer be treated as a peripheral social issue but as a central economic strategy with direct implications for poverty reduction, security, and regional competitiveness.

To achieve this transformation, the region needs a clear vision—one that positions youth as engines of innovation and digital productivity. This vision must be underpinned by coordinated skills development, universal digital inclusion, strengthened rural access, gender and disability mainstreaming, and a governance structure capable of aligning public and private efforts toward shared outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping youth employability in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States. The findings reveal a region blessed with a vibrant, educated, and increasingly aspirational youth population, yet constrained by structural, behavioural, and institutional barriers that limit their full participation in the labour market. While the quantitative data highlights gaps in digital access, skills acquisition, and employment outcomes, the qualitative insights offer deeper context on why these challenges persist and how they manifest in daily realities across the three states.

A central conclusion emerging from this research is that youth unemployment in the South-East is not merely a product of labour market scarcity but a reflection of systemic misalignments between education, skills, and economic opportunity. The overproduction of graduates without corresponding growth in industry-ready skills has resulted in a labour force that is formally educated but insufficiently prepared for the demands of a digital and rapidly evolving economy. This mismatch—common across many African countries—reveals a structural rigidity in the education-to-work pipeline that must be urgently reformed.

The study also concludes that behavioural and motivational factors play a significant, though often underestimated, role in shaping youth employability trajectories. Stakeholders across all states repeatedly emphasized issues such as low persistence, unrealistic expectations, limited exposure to workplace norms, and a growing preference for short-term gains over long-term skill development. While these behavioural patterns are shaped by broader socio-economic pressures, they nonetheless influence the ability of young people to benefit from training programs or sustain entrepreneurial ventures.

Digital inequality emerges as one of the clearest and most consequential divides. Access to affordable devices, reliable internet, and digital training is a critical determinant of who participates in the modern labour market and who is left behind. The disparity between digitally advantaged urban centres—particularly in Anambra—and the more digitally excluded rural areas in Abia and Imo is a major impediment to inclusive development. As global labour markets shift toward remote work, online services, and digital entrepreneurship, the cost of digital exclusion becomes increasingly high. Closing this gap is essential if the region intends to harness the full potential of its youth population.

Another major conclusion is the fragmented nature of the skills ecosystem. While numerous agencies, NGOs, and private actors implement training programs, the absence of coordination, shared labour market information, or unified standards limits the overall impact

of these efforts. Such fragmentation leads to duplication, inefficiencies, and a focus on low-level digital training that does not match the region's economic aspirations. Lessons from countries like Rwanda, Mauritius, and Kenya prove that coordinated governance structures, employer-led training, and centralized skill development frameworks significantly enhance youth employability outcomes. The South-East can benefit from adopting similar structures.

The rural–urban divide further compounds employability challenges, limiting access to opportunities for rural youth who face mobility barriers, weak connectivity, and limited exposure to economic opportunities. Unless addressed deliberately through rural-focused policies and targeted investments, this divide will continue to deepen inequality and limit regional development.

Despite these challenges, the study concludes that the South-East possesses enormous untapped potential. The strength of its youth population—expressed in creativity, adaptability, and entrepreneurial energy—combined with increasing government and private sector interest in digital transformation, provides a foundation for accelerated progress. The region's relatively high literacy rates and growing exposure to technology further position it for competitive advantage nationally and regionally.

Above all, the study concludes that technology presents the most powerful vehicle for transforming youth employability in the region. Remote work, digital freelancing, e-commerce, software development, digital content production, and tech-enabled services offer unprecedented opportunities for income generation and global market participation—regardless of geography. To unlock these opportunities, the region must prioritize digital infrastructure, advanced digital skills, and robust partnerships that link local talent to global work ecosystems.

The concluding insight is therefore both clear and hopeful: the region has the human capital needed to thrive; what is required now is a coordinated, future-oriented strategy that empowers young people to transition from potential to productivity. The next phase of inquiry—and action—must focus on translating these insights into concrete, evidence-based policy recommendations capable of unlocking the economic futures of millions of young citizens.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study point clearly to the need for a coordinated and future-oriented policy framework that addresses both the structural and behavioural dimensions of youth employability in Abia, Anambra, and Imo States. The challenges identified—digital exclusion, fragmented skills training, rural–urban inequalities, weak transition mechanisms from school to work, and uneven inclusion—require policy responses that are systemic rather than

piecemeal. The following recommendations offer realistic pathways that the three state governments and their partners can implement to improve youth employment outcomes.

- 1. Strengthening the Education–Skills–Employment Pipeline:** A fundamental policy priority for the region is to repair the broken link between education and employment. This can be achieved by gradually reforming secondary and tertiary curricula to include more experiential, competency-based and digitally oriented learning. Instead of relying solely on theoretical classroom teaching, schools and universities should integrate project-based work, digital assignments, community innovation challenges, and industry-derived problem-solving tasks. These reforms should be combined with structured workplace exposure, including mandatory internships or apprenticeships for final-year students. To make this feasible, state governments would need to establish partnerships with private firms, public agencies, and SMEs, while also creating incentives for employers who accept interns. A coordinated school-to-work transition system—managed through Youth Employability Offices within relevant ministries—would greatly strengthen the employability pipeline and reduce the soft-skill deficits identified in the study.
- 2. Expanding Digital Inclusion and Connectivity:** Digital access is now inseparable from economic opportunity. The pervasive gaps in internet access, device ownership, and digital literacy across the three states require deliberate investment. State governments should expand broadband connectivity through public–private partnerships with telecom operators, especially in rural areas. This includes offering right-of-way incentives and co-funding strategic connectivity infrastructure. At the same time, affordable device access must be prioritized. A practical approach is to introduce device-financing mechanisms that allow youths to acquire smartphones and laptops through installment plans administered by microfinance banks or fintech platforms. Setting up community digital learning hubs in libraries, community halls, or LGA centers—equipped with stable internet, computers, and basic mentorship—would provide rural youths with the tools they need to participate in online learning, remote jobs, and e-commerce. These investments are realizable and already implemented in countries such as Rwanda and India, where they dramatically expanded youth participation in digital labour markets.
- 3. Building a Coherent and Labour-Market Aligned Skills Ecosystem:** The current skills ecosystem in the South-East is active but fragmented, leading to duplication and weak impact. To address this, the states should jointly establish a South-East Skills Development Council that harmonizes the activities of NDE, ITF, SMEDAN, State ICT Agencies, and relevant ministries. Such a body would coordinate planning, set shared standards, and monitor performance across training providers. It would also manage a regional labour market information system that tracks emerging industries and skills

demand. Another crucial step is shifting training away from low-value courses such as basic digital marketing to more advanced and globally relevant skills such as cybersecurity, software development, data analytics, animation, and UI/UX design. Partnerships with organizations like Andela, IBM, ALX, Google Africa, and Cisco would make such training feasible and reputable. In the informal sector, states can enhance employability by introducing standardized certification for trades such as solar installation, tailoring, catering, and automobile repair—providing artisans with nationally recognized credentials that improve their marketability.

4. **Strengthening Youth Entrepreneurship and Access to Finance:** Entrepreneurship will remain an important employment pathway, especially for youths who cannot access wage jobs. However, many young entrepreneurs currently operate in survivalist modes because of limited capital, weak business structure, and poor digital visibility. The states can strengthen youth entrepreneurship by establishing a South-East Youth Enterprise Fund with modest but consistent financing available to viable youth-led businesses. This fund should be complemented by incubation and innovation labs that provide coaching, digital marketing assistance, legal advisory support, and product development guidance. Polytechnics and universities can serve as natural hosts for such hubs. To help youths break into wider markets, government and private actors should actively facilitate their onboarding onto digital platforms such as Jumia, Konga, Amazon, Upwork, Fiverr, and other e-commerce or freelancing ecosystems. With basic support, young entrepreneurs can begin supplying goods and digital services beyond their local communities.
5. **Bridging the Rural–Urban Divide:** The rural–urban divide documented in the study requires intentional, targeted interventions. Rural youths cannot benefit from digital opportunities if physical and digital infrastructure remain concentrated in urban centers. The states should deploy mobile digital training units—vehicles equipped with laptops, solar power, and trainers—capable of delivering short-term digital literacy programs in remote communities. Governments can also encourage the private sector to expand into rural LGAs by offering tax rebates or small operational grants for companies establishing satellite offices, agritech hubs, or processing centres in these areas. Integrating rural youths into digital agriculture is another practical opportunity. With training in drone-assisted agriculture, farm mapping, digital extension services, and e-procurement platforms, rural youths can access both on-farm and off-farm income streams. These interventions would not only provide employment but also stimulate rural economies.
6. **Reforming Institutional Governance and Coordination:** The fragmented institutional environment around youth employability must be addressed. The region would benefit immensely from the establishment of one-stop Youth Employability Centers in

each state. These centers would serve as hubs for job-matching, CV support, career counseling, skills registration, and apprenticeship placement. They should also host a regional employability dashboard that tracks training enrolment, digital skills growth, employment rates, and rural–urban participation. Annual multi-stakeholder Youth Employment Summits, involving government agencies, employers, training institutions, traditional leaders, civil society, and development partners, would provide a platform to review progress and adjust strategies in real time. These governance structures are realistic and have been successfully implemented in countries such as Rwanda and Mauritius, where they significantly improved coordination and workforce planning.

7. **Deepening Inclusion for Women and Persons with Disabilities:** Inclusion must move from being incidental to intentional. The states should adopt clear accessibility standards requiring that all training centers, digital hubs, and public-facing programs accommodate persons with disabilities through ramps, sign-language interpretation, screen readers, and adaptive devices. Gender-sensitive designs must ensure that women—especially young mothers—can participate by providing safe transport stipends and scheduling programs at times that do not conflict with domestic responsibilities. Investing in subsidized digital tools for women and PWDs, combined with mentorship programs tailored to their needs, will ensure that employability efforts reach all demographic groups.
8. **Promoting Behavioural Transformation and Mindset Reorientation:** Given the behavioural constraints documented in the study, employability strategies should include a youth mindset transformation component. States can launch a Youth Employability Readiness Campaign that promotes work ethic, discipline, persistence, and realistic goal setting through school clubs, community workshops, radio programmes, and social media content. Career guidance should begin early—ideally at the senior secondary level—with trained guidance counsellors providing information on labour-market trends, digital careers, entrepreneurship, and life planning. Countries like Finland demonstrate how early career coaching significantly improves youth transitions and motivation.