

**PERCEPTIONS OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS ON THE INTEGRATION OF
SOFT SKILLS IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY**

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores perceptions of 17 final-year pre-service teachers at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, on soft skills integration in their teacher education program. Using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001), interviews revealed soft skills; communication, classroom management, emotional regulation, and adaptability, as critical for Nigeria's diverse classrooms. Teaching practice and group work fostered self-efficacy and observational learning, yet barriers like theoretical curricula, language challenges, and limited practicum roles hindered development. Participants recommended simulations, mentorship, and emotional intelligence training to address gaps. The study advocates for experiential, mentor-supported training to enhance classroom readiness and employability. Findings underscore the need for curriculum reform to bridge theory and practice, preparing graduates for Nigeria's educational and employment demands. Future research should assess the longitudinal impact of such interventions on in-service teachers' performance and employability.

Keywords: Soft skills, teacher education, pre-service teachers, Nigeria

Introduction

In today's dynamic educational landscape, teachers are expected to demonstrate not only subject-matter expertise but also strong interpersonal and adaptive competencies. As the 21st-century workforce evolves, teacher education programs must

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equip pre-service teachers with holistic skills to meet the needs of modern classrooms, particularly in Nigeria. This shift reflects a growing emphasis on fostering both academic achievement and social-emotional growth in students, a task that demands proficient interpersonal abilities (Cross Francis *et al.*, 2019).

In Nigeria, teacher education curricula have traditionally prioritized pedagogical content knowledge, often neglecting systematic integration of interpersonal skills (Mata, 2024). This gap is evident at institutions like Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka, where resource constraints and outdated curricula limit opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop competencies needed for diverse learning environments (Nwune *et al.*, 2024). Such shortcomings challenge graduates' ability to navigate contemporary classrooms marked by student diversity and behavioral complexities.

The Nigerian educational system operates within a unique socio-cultural and economic context, characterized by rapid population growth, diverse student populations, and socioeconomic challenges (Mustapha & Omonike, 2025). These factors amplify the need for teachers who can adapt to varied learning needs, manage classroom dynamics, and engage communities effectively. Yet, teacher education programs often fail to meet these contextual demands, leaving graduates ill-equipped for Nigeria's highly competitive job market, where the few available positions in education and related sectors demand a strong blend of pedagogical expertise and interpersonal competencies (Daminabo, 2020; Eze *et al.*, 2022). This misalignment underscores the urgency of exploring pre-service teachers' lived experiences of soft skills integration at NAU, contributing to region-specific and broader discussions on teacher education reform.

Literature Review

According to Succi and Canovi (2020), the integration of soft skills into teacher education programs has attracted growing attention in recent decades, driven by the recognition that success in modern educational and professional environments requires more than technical proficiency. Soft skills encompassing attributes like communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, teamwork, and critical thinking are viewed as essential for teachers tasked with navigating complex classroom dynamics and fostering holistic student development (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Within the context of teacher education, these skills complement pedagogical knowledge, enriching a teacher's capacity to manage classrooms effectively, build meaningful student relationships, and respond to diverse learning needs.

Research highlights a significant mismatch between the skills demanded by 21st-century workplaces and those emphasized in traditional teacher education curricula (Robles, 2012; Jackson, 2016). Studies by Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011), and Mwita *et al.* (2023) assert that higher education institutions, including faculties of education, often emphasize academic knowledge and technical training at the expense of interpersonal skill development. This misalignment impacts teachers' classroom effectiveness and employability in educational and non-educational sectors, where interpersonal competencies are increasingly valued in a skill-driven labor market (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Several models and approaches for integrating soft skills into teacher education have been proposed. Project-based learning, reflective practice, mentorship programs, and experiential learning have emerged as promising strategies for fostering these competencies (Dogara *et al.*, 2020). Mentor modeling, for instance, enhances skills like communication by providing observable examples during practicum experiences, fostering confidence and competence (Sáez, 2024). According to Widad and Abdellah

(2022), embedding soft skills within disciplinary learning, rather than treating them as supplementary or optional, ensures their authentic development. Furthermore, contemporary educational frameworks, such as the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21 Framework), advocate for the integration of "4Cs"—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—into all areas of education, highlighting their role in preparing teachers and students for future societal challenges (P21, 2019). Within Nigeria, literature indicates limited but growing awareness of soft skills' importance in teacher preparation (Umeghalu & Obi, 2020). However, implementation of soft skills training in Nigerian teacher education remains inconsistent, hindered by curriculum rigidity, resource limitations, and inadequate professional development for teacher educators (Barnes *et al.*, 2019; Macqual *et al.*, 2021). Pre-service teachers often lack confidence in skills like conflict resolution, relying on informal learning during teaching practice rather than structured coursework (Ezeafuluke & Ezeobi, 2018; Okoye *et al.*, 2018). Phenomenological research is needed to capture their lived experiences, revealing contextual barriers and informing targeted curriculum reforms.

Scholars advocate for deliberate soft skills integration in Nigerian teacher education to enhance graduates' classroom performance (Dogara *et al.*, 2020; Macqual *et al.*, 2021). Curriculum reforms should include modules on communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence, emphasizing experiential learning and community engagement (Malynovska & Barantsova, 2024). Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Bandura (1986, 2001), this study views learning as the result of continuous interactions among personal factors (e.g., self-efficacy), environmental influences (e.g., curriculum, practicum settings), and behaviors (e.g., deploying soft skills in practice). SCT's focus on observational learning, such as witnessing effective communication during NAU's practicum, and fostering self-efficacy for classroom

management frames the exploration of pre-service teachers' soft skills development. This framework aligns naturally with the study's phenomenological approach, which captures participants' lived experiences and contextual challenges.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of final-year pre-service teachers regarding the integration of soft skills within their teacher education programs in South-East Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine how pre-service teachers conceptualize and experience soft skills in the context of their teacher education.
2. To investigate their perceptions of the extent and methods of soft skills integration within their academic and practicum-based training.
3. To identify the barriers and facilitators they encounter in developing soft skills during their education.
4. To elicit their recommendations for enhancing soft skills training in teacher education programs to better prepare future teachers.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative, phenomenological design to explore final-year pre-service teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of soft skills integration in teacher education programs at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka. The design is guided by Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology. The approach captures the essence of participants' subjective experiences while bracketing researcher biases through epoché, making it ideal for examining soft skills development in both academic and practicum contexts.

The study involves 17 final-year pre-service teachers from two departments in NAU's Faculty of Education, selected via purposive sampling for diverse perspectives.

Participants, chosen for completing at least one teaching practicum and being enrolled in a bachelor's degree program, offer insights across specializations like English or mathematics and practicum settings (urban or rural). Recruitment through university coordinators emphasizes voluntary participation.

Data collection entails in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes, conducted in-person for rich, narrative accounts aligned with phenomenological principles. Audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim, interviews capture verbal and non-verbal cues. A pilot test conducted with four participants helps refine the SCT-informed interview guide, ensuring that the questions are culturally appropriate and open-ended. Introductory questions explore participants' program journey and soft skills definitions; core questions probe specific soft skills moments, program support, and practicum influences; reflective questions address critical skills, program improvements, and confidence, with minimal probes to maintain narrative flow. Field notes supplement transcripts for context.

Ethical considerations prioritize participants' rights, as adults engaging in a non-sensitive topic, negating institutional permission. Informed consent, secured verbally and in writing via clear forms, details the study's purpose and participants' rights to withdraw. Anonymity is ensured through pseudonyms, with data stored securely in password-protected files. Interviews respect cultural norms, such as authority or gender dynamics. Reflexivity, via a reflective journal, documents biases (e.g., assumptions about soft skills' value), and positionality acknowledges the researcher's Nigerian education familiarity (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). In case of distress, participants will be offered breaks or referred to counseling services.

Data analysis follows Moustakas' (1994) approach: epoché brackets biases, horizontalization identifies significant statements, clustering forms meaning units (e.g.,

practicum experiences), textural and structural descriptions narrate what and how experiences occurred, and a composite essence synthesizes findings. NVivo supports coding, with manual backup. Rigor involves member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. SCT frames interpretations through self-efficacy, observational learning, and triadic reciprocity.

Results

This study utilized Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of 17 final-year pre-service teachers at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka, regarding the integration of soft skills in their teacher education program. Data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed through epoche (bracketing biases), horizontalization (identifying significant statements), clustering into meaning units, textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis into a composite essence. The findings are organized by the study's four objectives: (1) examine how pre-service teachers conceptualize and experience soft skills, (2) investigate perceptions of the extent and methods of soft skills integration, (3) identify barriers and facilitators in soft skills development, and (4) elicit recommendations for enhancing soft skills training. Themes are presented in tables for clarity, grounded in Social Cognitive Theory's (SCT) constructs of self-efficacy, observational learning, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986, 2001), and contextualized within Nigeria's educational challenges (Ogunyinka *et al.*, 2015).

Objective 1: Conceptualization and Experiences of Soft Skills

The first objective explored how pre-service teachers conceptualize and experience soft skills in their teacher education program. Participants defined soft skills as interpersonal competencies essential for teaching, emphasizing communication, classroom management, emotional regulation, and support for diverse learners. These

conceptualizations align with the socio-cultural demands of Nigerian classrooms, characterized by student diversity and behavioral complexities (Obiagu, 2022). For example, Respondent 4 described soft skills as *“being able to connect with people, understand their perspective,”* highlighting relational aspects, while Respondent 6 focused on *“communicating effectively well with children”* to ensure comprehension. Experiences of soft skills development centered on teaching practice and group-based activities, which were described as transformative in fostering confidence and practical competencies.

Table 1: Themes and Subthemes for Conceptualization and Experiences of Soft Skills

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Statements	SCT Construct
Conceptualization	Interpersonal and Relational Skills	<i>“Skills that help me in my work and my interactions with others... handling children”</i> (R1); <i>“Help a teacher build relationships with students”</i> (R11)	Personal factors (self-efficacy in relationships)
	Communication as Central	<i>“Communication skills and teamwork”</i> (R2); <i>“Important soft skill... communication, empathy”</i> (R9)	Behavioral outcomes (effective interaction)
	Classroom Management and Emotional Regulation	<i>“Adaptation to any kind of stress... manage your emotions”</i> (R3); <i>“Classroom management”</i> (R5)	Personal factors (emotional self-efficacy)
	Supporting Diverse Learners	<i>“Understand and support your students from diverse backgrounds”</i> (R4); <i>“Help... special needs children”</i> (R7)	Environmental influences (diverse contexts)

Experiences	Practicum as Transformative	“Teaching Practice... helped boost my confidence” (R3); “Inculcated patience... relate with children” (R6)	Observational learning (modeling in practicum)
	Group Work and Collaboration	“Collaborative learning... builds strong communication skills” (R1); “Group presentation... taught me... collaboration” (R4)	Observational learning (peer modeling)

Textural Description: Participants experienced soft skills development through practical engagement, particularly teaching practice, which enhanced confidence (R3: “put my fear aside”), patience (R6: “inculcated patience”), and adaptability to diverse learners (R11: “adjust my teaching styles”). Group projects, such as Respondent 4’s collaborative presentation, fostered communication, teamwork, and time management, enabling participants to translate theoretical knowledge into practice. These experiences were pivotal in building relational and managerial competencies.

Structural Description: Soft skills development occurred within NAU’s teacher education program, primarily through teaching practice and group assignments. Observational learning was evident as participants modeled mentor behaviors during practicum (R6) or learned from peers in collaborative tasks (R4). Self-efficacy grew through successful experiences, such as public speaking (R4), but was shaped by environmental factors, including supportive instructors (R1) and challenging practicum settings (R3). These processes reflect SCT’s triadic reciprocity of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 2001).

Objective 2: Perceptions of Soft Skills Integration

The second objective investigated participants’ perceptions of the extent and methods of soft skills integration in their academic and practicum-based training.

Participants generally perceived positive integration through micro-teaching, teaching practice, and group assignments, which supported skills like communication and collaboration. However, they identified gaps in emotional intelligence and conflict management training, indicating incomplete integration. For instance, Respondent 1 stated, “No time when we felt soft skills were not addressed,” suggesting satisfaction, whereas Respondent 11 noted, “Emotional intelligence and conflict management were not fully addressed,” highlighting deficiencies.

Table 2: Themes and Subthemes for Perceptions of Soft Skills Integration

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Statements	SCT Construct
Integration Perceptions	Positive Integration via Courses and Practicum	“ <i>We were taught how to collaborate, field work, time planning</i> ” (R1); “ <i>Micro teaching... helped develop communication</i> ” (R9)	Environmental influences (curriculum support)
	Limited Emphasis on Certain Skills	“ <i>I need more emphasis on... emotional intelligence</i> ” (R5); “ <i>Emotional intelligence and conflict management... not fully address</i> ” (R11)	Environmental influences (curriculum gaps)

Textural Description: Micro-teaching and teaching practice were effective in developing communication (R9: “*role playing and group discussion*”) and classroom management skills (R10). Group assignments, such as Respondent 1’s collaborative learning tasks, supported teamwork and time management. However, participants like Respondent 5 emphasized the need for greater focus on emotional intelligence, and Respondent 11 highlighted inadequate conflict management training, indicating gaps in the curriculum’s scope.

Structural Description: Integration was facilitated through structured activities like micro-teaching and practicum, where role-playing and real-world teaching enabled observational learning (R8, R9). However, the curriculum’s theoretical orientation and limited attention to emotional intelligence and conflict resolution constrained comprehensive integration, consistent with challenges in Nigerian teacher education (Ogunyinka *et al.*, 2015). Supportive instructors and peer interactions were key enablers, but systemic gaps persisted, aligning with SCT’s environmental influences (Bandura, 2001).

Objective 3: Barriers and Facilitators in Soft Skills Development

The third objective identified barriers and facilitators in developing soft skills. Participants reported significant barriers, including an overemphasis on theoretical instruction, contextual challenges (e.g., language barriers, disorganized school environments), and restricted practicum roles. Facilitators included hands-on experiences in teaching practice and collaborative group work, which provided practical opportunities for skill application.

Table 3: Themes and Subthemes for Barriers and Facilitators

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Statements	SCT Construct
Barriers	Lack of Practical Opportunities	“We are normally being taught theory aspect, but... not enough time to practice” (R6); “Training focused more on theory” (R10)	Environmental influences (curriculum constraints)
	Contextual Challenges	“They communicated only in Igbo... communication was a problem” (R3); “The school itself was disorganised” (R4)	Environmental influences (school settings)

	Restricted Practicum Roles	“Schools don’t give us opportunity to communicate with parents... handle conflicts” (R1)	Environmental influences (limited autonomy)
Facilitators	Hands-On Experiences	“Micro teaching and... teaching practice” (R2); “Teaching Practice... made me understand... learners” (R6)	Observational learning (practicum exposure)
	Collaborative and Reflective Practices	“Lecturers... share us in groups... share ideas” (R1); “Group work... encourages effective communication” (R6)	Observational learning (peer collaboration)

Textural Description: Barriers hindered effective soft skills development. Respondents 6 and 10 criticized the program’s theoretical focus, noting insufficient practical training. Contextual challenges included language barriers (R3: “They communicated only in Igbo”) and disorganized practicum schools (R4: “The school itself was disorganised”). Restricted roles, such as Respondent 1’s inability to engage with parents, limited real-world practice. Conversely, teaching practice facilitated patience and adaptability (R6), and group work enhanced communication and collaboration (R1, R4), serving as key enablers.

Structural Description: Barriers stemmed from NAU’s curriculum design, which prioritized theory over practice (Ogunyinka *et al.*, 2015), and external practicum environments, reflecting Nigeria’s resource constraints (Macqual *et al.*, 2021). Language barriers highlighted socio-cultural challenges (Obiagu, 2022). Facilitators operated through experiential learning, with practicum enabling observational learning (R6) and group work fostering peer modeling (R1), consistent with SCT’s environmental and behavioral factors (Bandura, 2001). Supportive instructors mitigated some barriers, but systemic issues persisted.

Objective 4: Recommendations for Enhancing Soft Skills Training

The fourth objective elicited recommendations for improving soft skills training to better prepare future teachers. Participants proposed more practical, real-world training, workshops, mentorship programs, and a focus on emotional intelligence and conflict management, emphasizing the need to bridge the theory-practice gap and enhance employability (Okolie *et al.*, 2020).

Table 4: Themes and Subthemes for Recommendations

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Statements	SCT Construct
Recommendations	More Practical and Real-World Training	“Incorporating more real work scenarios and replaying” (R4); “More handson activities... real world classroom simulations” (R10)	Environmental influences (enhanced practice)
	Workshops and Mentorship	“Bringing in experienced teachers to share their experiences” (R6); “More workshops... mentorship programme” (R15)	Observational learning (mentor modeling)
	Focus on Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management	“More experimental learning... for emotional intelligence” (R9); “Workshops... on emotional management” (R11)	Personal factors (emotional self-efficacy)

Textural Description: Participants advocated for real-world scenarios, such as role-playing (R4) and classroom simulations (R10), to prepare for teaching challenges. Workshops and mentorship were emphasized, with Respondent 6 suggesting “*experienced teachers to share their experiences*” and Respondent 11 proposing “*mentorship programme where experienced teachers guide students.*” Emotional

intelligence and conflict management were prioritized (R9, R15), addressing perceived curriculum gaps.

Structural Description: Recommendations were informed by participants' experiences of limited practical training and contextual challenges. The call for simulations reflects a desire for experiential learning environments, aligning with SCT's observational learning (Bandura, 1986). Mentorship would leverage expert modeling, while workshops on emotional intelligence enhance personal factors like self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). These suggestions address Nigeria's employability demands, where soft skills are critical for job readiness (Okolie *et al.*, 2020).

Composite Essence

The essence of pre-service teachers' experiences with soft skills at NAU is a journey of developing interpersonal competencies—communication, teamwork, patience, and emotional regulation—through transformative yet constrained opportunities. They conceptualize soft skills as relational tools for managing diverse learners, shaped by Nigeria's socio-cultural and employability challenges. Teaching practice and group work foster confidence and adaptability via observational learning, but barriers like theoretical curricula, language challenges, and restricted practicum roles limit development. While some perceive robust integration, others highlight gaps in emotional intelligence and conflict management, advocating for simulations, mentorship, and workshops to bridge theory and practice. Their growing self-efficacy, rooted in practical successes, coexists with aspirations for curriculum reform to navigate Nigeria's complex educational landscape, reflecting SCT's interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors.

Discussion

This phenomenological study of pre-service teachers at NAU illuminates soft skills integration, aligning with global and Nigerian literature while highlighting contextual

challenges. Grounded in SCT (Bandura, 1986, 2001), the findings offer insights into curriculum reform and employability.

Participants viewed soft skills as interpersonal competencies, communication, classroom management, emotional regulation, and support for diverse learners, mirroring Succi and Canovi (2020) and reflecting Nigeria's diverse classrooms (Obiagu, 2022). Teaching practice and group work were transformative, fostering self-efficacy and observational learning (Bandura, 2001). For example, Respondent 6 noted patience development, aligning with Dogara *et al.*'s (2020) experiential learning advocacy. However, reliance on informal practicum learning echoes Ezeafuluke and Ezeobi's (2018) critique of unstructured soft skills development, suggesting a need for intentional integration.

Participants valued micro-teaching and practicum but noted gaps in emotional intelligence and conflict management (Macqual *et al.*, 2021). Variability e.g., Respondent 1's satisfaction versus Respondent 17's concerns reflect inconsistent implementation, supporting Hinchliffe and Jolly's (2011) critique of technical knowledge prioritization. SCT highlights how these gaps undermine self-efficacy, indicating NAU's curriculum could embed soft skills systematically (Widad & Abdellah, 2022).

Barriers included theoretical instruction (Respondent 10), language challenges (Respondent 3), and restricted practicum roles (Respondent 1), aligning with Ogunyinka *et al.*'s (2015) critique of curriculum rigidity. Language issues underscore Nigeria's multilingual context (Obiagu, 2022), while limited roles hinder experiential learning (Ezeafuluke & Ezeobi, 2018). Facilitators like collaborative group work enabled peer modeling (Bandura, 2001), but their informal nature suggests a lack of systematic support (Umeghalu & Obi, 2020).

Participants proposed simulations, mentorship, and emotional intelligence training. Simulations (Respondent 4) align with Dogara *et al.*'s (2020) practical learning approach, while mentorship (Respondent 11) supports Sáez's (2024) mentor modeling findings, reinforcing SCT's observational learning. Emotional intelligence training addresses curriculum gaps (Macqual *et al.*, 2021), enhancing employability in Nigeria's job market (Okolie *et al.*, 2020). While the study provides rich insights, its focus on 17 NAU pre-service teachers limits generalizability. Additionally, reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce recall bias, though member checking mitigated this. Future research with larger, diverse samples could enhance transferability.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several strategies are proposed for enhancing soft skills integration in NAU's teacher education program and similar Nigerian institutions. First, the curriculum should incorporate structured modules on communication, emotional intelligence, and conflict management, utilizing role-playing and simulations to facilitate observational learning and self-efficacy development (Dogara *et al.*, 2020). Second, practicum roles should be expanded to include parent-teacher interactions and conflict resolution, providing pre-service teachers with practical contexts for soft skills application (Ezeafuluke & Ezeobi, 2018). Third, mentorship programs pairing pre-service teachers with experienced educators would enable mentor modeling, fostering confidence and competence in interpersonal skills (Sáez, 2024). Finally, contextual support, such as language and classroom management training, is essential to address Nigeria's socio-cultural challenges, ensuring graduates are equipped for diverse classrooms (Obiagu, 2022). These recommendations aim to strengthen curriculum relevance and graduate employability, aligning with Nigeria's educational and workforce needs.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings have significant implications for teacher education at NAU and beyond. Curriculum designers should prioritize experiential learning through enhanced practicum opportunities and structured modules on emotional intelligence and conflict management, as suggested by participants. Mentorship programs, leveraging experienced teachers, could formalize observational learning, addressing informal learning's limitations (Ezeafuluke & Ezeobi, 2018). These reforms would enhance self-efficacy and employability, aligning with SCT's personal and behavioral factors (Bandura, 2001) and Nigeria's educational needs (Mustapha & Omonike, 2025).

For future research, longitudinal studies could explore how soft skills training impacts in-service teachers' classroom performance and career trajectories in Nigeria. Comparative studies across Nigerian institutions could identify best practices for soft skills integration, addressing regional variations. Additionally, quantitative research could measure the impact of proposed interventions (e.g., simulations, mentorship) on self-efficacy and employability, complementing this study's qualitative insights. Exploring teacher educators' perspectives could further illuminate curriculum design challenges, building on Barnes *et al.*'s (2019) findings.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study of 17 pre-service teachers at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka, reveals soft skills (communication, classroom management, emotional regulation, and adaptability) as essential for navigating Nigeria's unique educational domain. Participants' experiences highlight teaching practice and group work as transformative, fostering self-efficacy and observational learning (Bandura, 2001), yet barriers such as theoretical curricula, language challenges, and restricted practicum roles constrain development. The findings underscore the need for curriculum reform at NAU,

aligning with global calls for soft skills integration (Succi & Canovi, 2020) and Nigerian-specific challenges (Ogunyinka *et al.*, 2015). Recommendations for real-world simulations, mentorship, and emotional intelligence training offer actionable strategies to bridge the theory-practice gap and enhance employability (Okolie *et al.*, 2020). By addressing these gaps, NAU can better prepare graduates for classroom and employment demands, contributing to sustainable teacher education reform in Nigeria. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of such interventions on in-service teachers' performance and employability.

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