



# Increasing graduates' employability skills through rational emotive career coaching

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**Background:** The high level of non-employability among graduates could be attributed to insufficient career coaching programmes in higher education institutions.

**Objectives:** This study examined whether rational emotive career coaching (RECC) increases graduates' employability skills. The study also explored the effect of RECC on acquiring employability skills by gender.

**Methods:** A group-randomised trial (GRT) design was used to examine the outcomes of a training programme in Enugu State aimed at improving career beliefs and employability skills. A total of 158 participants were randomised into either the control or treatment groups. The Career Belief Patterns Scale, Version 2, and the Employability Skills Acquisition Scale (ESAS) were used to collect data. A pretest was administered during the first week, followed by a post-test after the eighth week, followed by a follow-up one month after the intervention ended. Data were analysed using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA).

**Results:** According to the results obtained, participants in the RECC intervention acquired significant employability skills. Graduates' employability skills acquisition does not appear to be affected by gender and treatments.

**Conclusion:** This study concludes that RECC enhances graduates' employability skills effectively. Graduating students who acquire the skills to identify and dispute their irrational beliefs are empowered to make informed career choices and acquire skills that are highly valued today.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to the growing body of research supporting rational emotive coaching as a valuable intervention for graduates seeking a competitive edge in the job market.

**Keywords:** employability skills; rational emotive career coaching; irrational beliefs; graduates; Nigeria; Africa.

## Introduction

Large numbers of graduates in Nigeria and other countries are unemployed. In this case, there may be a number of perpetuating factors. The most pronounced factor, however, is the inability to acquire employability skills coupled with irrational career thoughts. Graduates with irrational thoughts may avoid taking progressive steps towards achieving career goals, according to Paivandy et al. (2008). In the same way, they may avoid acquiring information on skills while internalising information that supports a negative opinion and then seeking negative or irrational evidence to back it up. According to studies, individuals with negative career thoughts are less likely to gain employability skills (Mertler et al., 2021). It may therefore be possible for graduates with negative career thoughts to also have poor employability skills.

The concept of irrational beliefs refers to negative thoughts and attitudes among graduates with regard to a career. Among these beliefs are beliefs that 'finding a job is difficult', 'employment is through whom one knows', 'the economy is bad and we cannot do anything'; 'it is difficult to be an entrepreneur'; 'older people hate younger ones'; 'wicked individuals are attacking youths'; 'young people do not have the opportunity to rule'; 'graduates deserve white collar jobs', among others (Otu & Omeje, 2021). In some cases, these thoughts may manifest as overgeneralisations, as graduates may generalise negative experiences from their past or from limited exposure to the workplace. Consequently, they become convinced that their chosen career path is not well suited to them. There is also an irrational belief known as all-or-nothing thinking, in which graduates

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view situations as either entirely positive or entirely negative without taking into consideration the possibilities for growth and improvement. Irrational beliefs about labelling are also prevalent. The term refers to the situation where graduates may label themselves as failures or inadequate when confronted with challenges or setbacks. They are hindered in their ability to bounce back and develop resilience as a result of this. Further, mind-reading is considered to be an irrational belief, which occurs when graduates project their own negative thoughts and fears onto others, resulting in confusion and strained relationships at work. Furthermore, excessive worrying is a sign of an irrational belief, which indicates that graduates are suffering from excessive anxiety. In addition to making it difficult for them to focus on tasks, it hinders their ability to solve problems (Ifeanyieze et al., 2021; Mkpoinke et al., 2021a, 2021b; Ogbuanya et al., 2018).

Based on this, it was assumed that high levels of dysfunctional career beliefs would result in low levels of employability skills (Otu & Omeje, 2021). Employability skills, according to Paadi (2014), include personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure employment they are satisfied with. A graduate's ability to perform effectively on any job depends on skills such as general, professional and skills (Ju et al., 2012). Skills associated with employability include teamwork, communication, self-management, analysis, critical thinking, adaptive skills, transferrable skills and self-reliance (Jackson, 2013). In terms of operation, employability skills are the skills that graduates need in order to be effective in the workplace. These skills were organised into three categories by the researchers. Team-working skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills and leadership skills fall under the first category of people skills. A second category of skills is self-reliance, which includes self-awareness, proactive skills, willingness to learn, self-promotion, networking and planning skills. A third category is general employment skills, which include problem-solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, flexibility, business acumen, computer literacy, technological skills, numeracy skills, commitment skills and skills for applying for jobs, such as writing a sellable curriculum vitae, cover letter and interviewing.

Many tertiary institutions fail to emphasise employability skills acquisition despite the importance of such skills. According to Bridgstock (2017), schools do not adequately emphasise the acquisition of employability skills. Graduating with low employability skills results in low employment rates (Jackson, 2013). Additionally, traditional tertiary education does not adequately prepare students for employment (Hennemann & Liefner, 2010). These factors result in a large number of Nigerian graduates who lack the necessary skills for employment and entrepreneurship (Paadi, 2014). Graduating students with first-degree certificates who cannot find a job within 2–3 years return to school to obtain higher degrees, such as master's and doctoral degrees, hoping that higher degrees will make finding a job easier. In spite of the fact that there are job vacancies in the country, many graduates are still unemployed (Agaba, 2019; Sodipo, 2014).

As Nigerian employers seek to establish an international presence, they are competing in the global market with high expectations. Because of this development, the competition for employing workers with high employability skills has grown even more fierce (Okpara, 2016). Thus, individuals with low employability skills are less likely to find employment. The job market has undergone significant changes in recent years, and the advent of new technologies has only intensified this trend. With the rise of automation, artificial intelligence (AI), and digitisation, the demand for workers with high employability skills has become increasingly crucial. As a result, graduates with low employability skills face increased challenges in securing employment. The lack of employability skills acquisition in Enugu State in particular has left many individuals with little chance of being employed or starting their own business (Agboeze & Ugwoke, 2013). The major concern is that most people are unwilling to learn employability skills that would make them employable because of their personal thoughts and beliefs.

This study utilises the concept of rational emotive behaviour theory developed by Albert Ellis in 1955. From the perspective of this theory, the interpretation or thoughts recent graduates have about themselves concerning the world of work constitute low employability skills acquisition. Following this preposition, rational emotive career coaching (RECC) emphasises the role of cognitive processes in shaping an individual's emotions and career-related behaviour. Ellis proposed that individuals hold irrational thoughts, such as beliefs that are overly negative and unrealistic, which contribute to emotional distress and difficulties in fulfilling their goals. Thus, irrational thoughts play a significant role in hindering the development of employability skills among recent graduates. Individuals who have irrational beliefs are people who show thoughts and feelings that lead to ineffective employability skills or are unable to make meaningful skills acquisitions. In many cases, these beliefs are based on inaccurate information or distorted perceptions, which then have a negative impact on the employability of the individual (Ifeanyieze et al., 2021). Thus, in the present study, RECC might impact the graduates to dispute their irrational beliefs to enhance their chances of acquiring employability skills.

The researcher acknowledges that the graduates' demographic variables such as gender may have influence on the effect of RECC on employability skills acquisition. Thus, gender was considered as an interacting variable in this study. Understanding the influence of gender on the impact of RECC may provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of this intervention for different genders. Meanwhile, research has shown that gender can shape individuals' approaches to acquisition of employability skills (Dominic & Fulgence, 2019; Idiaka & Uzoechi, 2016). Based on this, the current study aims to explore the interaction between gender and the effectiveness of RECC intervention. Previous research has demonstrated disparities in the levels of employability skills among male and female individuals (O'Leary, 2021), making it crucial to

establish the impact of gender on the effectiveness of RECC intervention.

## Objectives

The objective of this study is to determine whether RECC increases graduates' employability skills. The study also sought to investigate the impact of RECC on acquiring employability skills based on gender.

## The null hypotheses

We tested the following hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance to help guide the study:

- Rational emotive career coaching does not significantly increase employability skills acquisition among graduates.
- Gender does not affect RECC's impact on employability skills acquisition significantly.

## Research methods and design

### Design

This study was designed as a group-randomised trial (GRT). Group-randomised trials are particularly suitable for interventions that operate at the group level. This design allows for the random assignment of participants into groups, where one group receives the intervention while the other serves as a control or comparison group. One of the key advantages of the GRT is its scalability. It allows researchers to test the effectiveness of interventions in a real-world setting, such as a school, community or workplace. By grouping participants together, the GRT enables researchers to study the effects of an intervention on a larger population (Otu & Omeje, 2021).

### Ethical considerations

The research ethics committee at the Faculty of Education at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka has approved this study (Number: REC/UNN/FE/2019/ 000038). The approval is a testament to the ethical consideration and rigour applied to conducting the study. The approval process typically involves a comprehensive review of all aspects of the study. This may involve evaluating the research design, methodology, data collection procedures, potential risks and benefits, informed consent procedures and ethical considerations. The committee also consulted with experts in the field to ensure impartiality and thoroughness.

### Participants

In a multi-stage sampling process, 158 recent university graduates from Enugu State were selected for the study. The selection of participants began by employing a volunteer sampling technique. This technique involved advertising the study through various methods such as public announcements and registration. Through these channels, 349 recent university graduates were initially identified for eligibility assessment. The eligibility assessment was

conducted to further narrow down the pool of potential participants to a subset of 176 individuals who met the specific requirements of the study. The requirements for the eligibility assessment were focussed on ensuring that participants met specific criteria, such as having completed their university education within a specified timeframe and having low employability skills.

During the study, 18 participants withdrew for personal reasons. This withdrawal rate was relatively low, indicating that the participants had a good understanding of the study requirements and were committed to their participation. The withdrawal of the participants did not affect the overall integrity of the study, as the data were collected from the remaining 158 participants, providing a representative sample for the analysis. Overall, the sampling technique used in the study ensured that the selected participants were representative of the target population, and the withdrawal rate was kept to a reasonable level, ensuring the integrity of the data (see Figure 1).

## Experimental procedure

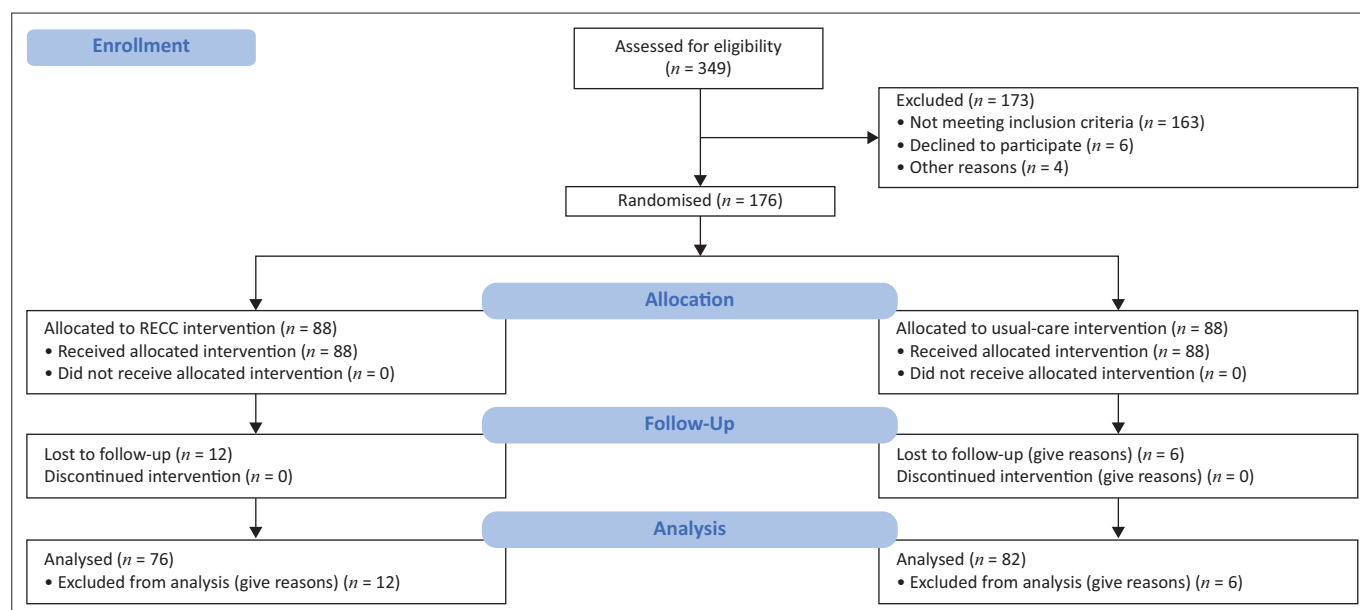
It followed the same procedure as the author's previous published work (Otu & Omeje, 2021). A total of 349 graduates registered, signed the informed consent form and underwent a pretest assessment for eligibility. We randomised 176 graduates who consented to take part in this study equally between a treatment group and a usual care group. For 8 weeks, the graduates in the treatment group were given RECC intervention twice a week for 50 min each. Post-intervention assessments were conducted in the eighth week of the intervention programme among participants in the control and treatment groups. After the 8-week treatment period, there was a follow-up period of 2 weeks (four sessions).

### Intervention

This study aims to explore the utilisation of Rational Emotive Career Coaching (RECC) as a treatment programme aimed at addressing the barriers that prevent graduates from acquiring employability skills. The programme focusses on identifying and disputing irrational beliefs, as well as providing training in various employability skills.

#### Step 1: Identifying and disputing irrational career beliefs

The first step in empowering individuals to acquire employability skills is to identify and dispute irrational beliefs that hinder their progress. Irrational beliefs refer to thoughts and statements that are inaccurate, exaggerated or based on faulty assumptions (Dryden, 2012). By challenging these irrational beliefs, individuals can reframe their mindset and develop a more realistic and empowering perspective. The ABCDEF framework was adapted from Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) intervention (Ellis, 2013; Ellis & Dryden, 2007; Ellis et al., 2010), wherein A stands for activating event, which is the trigger that sets off the emotional response; B represents the belief or thought that arises in response to the activating event; C stands for the



RECC, rational emotive career coaching.

**FIGURE 1:** Study flow diagram.

consequences or emotions that arise as a result of the belief; D stands for disputing and challenging the irrational belief; E stands for experiencing the belief's consequences and challenging them and F stands for formulating an alternative, rational belief and trying out new behaviours. The ABCDEF framework helps individuals identify and challenge irrational beliefs that contribute to their emotional distress. By breaking down the cognitive-emotional process into manageable steps, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of their thought patterns and develop new strategies to manage their emotions effectively.

## Step 2: Providing comprehensive training

Once irrational beliefs are identified and disputed, the next step is to provide comprehensive training to equip participants with the necessary tools and confidence to acquire employability skills. The training specifically targets three categories of employability skills: people skills, self-reliance skills and general employment skills:

**People skills category:** In the people skills category, the primary focus is on developing attributes and competencies that enable individuals to work effectively with others. Participants learn how to build teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, leadership skills and customer-oriented skills.

**Self-reliance skills category:** Another category of treatment involves building self-reliance skills. Utilising the principles of RECC, participants are taught how to become self-reliant. This aspect of the programme aims to empower individuals to take responsibility for their own growth, development and career success. Participants learn problem-solving skills, decision-making skills and time management skills, among others, to enhance their ability to work independently and confidently.

**General employment skills category:** Lastly, the general employment skills category encompasses a range of competencies that are essential for obtaining and maintaining employment. These skills include resume writing, interview preparation, job search strategies and workplace professionalism.

This treatment used direct teaching, one-to-one counselling and group counselling approaches for treatment. Cognitive restructuring, role play, journaling, unravelling cognitive distortions and exposure were the major techniques used in this study. In addition, after each session, participants had ample opportunity to practice and demonstrate the skills in small and large groups. It enabled the researchers to determine the progress of the treatment and lapses in the process of assimilation and sensitivity.

## Usual-care

Usual-care career services was designed to meet the needs of participants in the control group. These services were typically provided by career counsellors or professionals who have extensive experience in career development. The participants in the usual-care control group were given usual-care intervention. Usual-care refers to the intervention practices in which the participants had conventional care or treatment (Thompson & Schoenfeld, 2007). It involved:

**Career assessment:** The first step in usual-care career services was to conduct a comprehensive career assessment. This assessment helps individuals gain a better understanding of their strengths, interests, skills and values. It involves a combination of self-assessment tools and professional evaluations.

**Career exploration:** Once a career assessment has been conducted, career counsellors-assisted individuals in exploring

various career options. This involves researching different occupations, industries and job roles that align with the individual's interests and skills. Career counsellors can provide information on educational requirements, job outlook, salary ranges and opportunities for growth.

**Job search strategies:** Once individuals have determined their career goals and identified potential career paths, career counsellors provide guidance and support in the job search process. This includes assisting with resume and cover letter writing, developing networking strategies and assisting with job applications. Counsellors also provided advice on interview preparation, salary negotiation and other job-related skills.

**Counselling and support:** In addition to career-related services, usual-care career services often include counselling and psychological support. Counsellors helped individuals navigate personal challenges, such as stress, anxiety or self-doubt, which may be affecting their career development. They can also provide strategies for managing work-life balance, setting career goals and developing strategies for career success.

**Follow-up and accountability:** Usual-care career services provided follow-up and accountability to support individuals throughout their career development journey. Counsellors wished to check in periodically to assess progress, provide encouragement and offer additional support when needed.

## Measures

### Career Belief Patterns Scale, Version 2

The Career Belief Patterns Scale, Version 2 (CBPS-2), is a psychological assessment tool developed by Arulmani (2006) to assess an individual's receptivity to irrational career beliefs. The scale consists of 32 items designed to evaluate the beliefs that individuals hold about their careers and their impact on their decision-making and overall well-being. Each dimension consists of several items that measure specific irrational beliefs that contribute to career dissatisfaction and hinder personal growth.

The CBPS-2 factor analysis yielded seven subscales: the proficiency belief set has eight items, control and self-direction belief set has eight items, culture and common practices have five items, self-worth has two items, persistence belief set has three items, fatalism belief set has four items and caste belief set has two items. The Career Beliefs Scale-2 (CBP-2) is a widely used assessment tool for diagnosing self-defeating career beliefs in students. The items of the CBPS-2 provide a structured framework for exploring and analysing individuals' career beliefs. The responses range on a 7-point Likert response continuum, ranging from 'I do not agree with this at all' (1) to 'I agree completely' (7).

Higher scores on the CBPS-2 indicate a higher negativity in career beliefs. The scores can range from 40 to 280, with higher scores indicating the need for further exploration.

The CBPS-2 items provide valuable insight into the irrational beliefs that graduates may hold about their careers. For example, items such as 'I make mistakes and am weak' and 'I can't make a career choice that is completely different from what my family expects' indicate beliefs that may be holding individuals back from their full potential. As a whole, the reliability of the subscales reported in previous studies ranged between 0.78 and 0.88 (Ogbuanya et al., 2018). In the present study, the reliability of the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the full-scale CBPS-2 was found to be 0.79.

### The Development of Employability Skills Acquisition Scale

The Employability Skills Acquisition Scale (ESAS) is a newly developed assessment tool designed to measure the acquisition of employability skills among individuals. The development of the ESAS was done during one of the researchers' (the lead author's) doctoral programme as part of a measurement tool in his thesis. It involved a comprehensive process involving the following steps:

- **Identifying employability skills:** The first step in the development process was to identify the core employability skills that are essential for success in today's job market. These skills were identified through extensive research and consultation with industry experts.
- **Content development:** Once the employability skills were identified, a team of subject matter experts developed items for each skill. These items were carefully crafted to reflect the specific attributes and behaviours associated with each skill. The researchers developed the items of the instrument in line with the employability skills literature (Berntson, 2008; Fugate et al., 2004; Higdon, 2015, 2016; Jackson, 2012; Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Ju et al., 2012; Riebe & Jackson, 2014). The instrument has 38 items measured on a four-point rating scale of strongly agreed (4), agreed (3), disagreed (2) and strongly disagreed (1).
- **Validation:** The pool of items was reviewed and evaluated by a group of experts to ensure the content validity of the scale. The experts included educators, career professionals and psychologists with relevant experience in the field. An attempt was made to determine whether the ESAS measures dimensions that are different from other employability skills acquisition instruments in an attempt to determine its construct validity. It was observed that ESAS measures construct differently from Employability Skills Questionnaire (Jonck & Minnaar, 2015) and Employability Skills Measurement Scale (ESMS) developed by Ramisetty (2017).

To establish the criterion measure, the researchers used a well-established employability skills assessment tool called the Employability Skills Inventory (ESI) (Jonck & Minnaar, 2015; Mohd Yusof et al., 2014; Stephen & Oladimeji Festus, 2022; Verecio, 2016). The ESI is widely

regarded as a valid and reliable measure for assessing employability skills. In order to evaluate the criterion validity of the ESAS, a sample of 30 participants was selected from the target population. Participants were required to complete both the ESAS and the ESI, and then their scores were compared to determine the correlation between these two measures. The results of the criterion validity analysis revealed a strong correlation between the ESAS and the ESI. The correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was found to be 0.81, indicating a strong positive relationship between these two measures. This strong correlation suggests that the ESAS is a valid and reliable measure of employability skills:

- **Pilot testing:** A pilot test was conducted with a diverse sample of individuals to validate the content and reliability of the ESAS. Feedback from these participants was used to refine the scale and ensure its relevance and effectiveness.
- **Reliability testing:** The ESAS was administered to a sample of individuals to determine its internal consistency reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated based on this data, providing a measure on the scale's reliability. The internal consistency of the instrument (ESAS) was established in clusters: cluster one (people skills) = 0.877, cluster two (self-reliance skills) = 0.617, cluster three (general employment skills) = 0.951 and overall cluster = 0.960.
- **Expert review:** The final version of the ESAS was reviewed and approved by a panel of experts in the field during one the researchers' doctoral seminar.

## Method of data analysis

To analyse the data, descriptive statistics were employed to determine the mean ratings of the participants across the three assessment periods. The mean ratings provide a measure of the central tendency and help us understand the overall performance of the participants. Additionally, the standard deviation (SD) measures the variability or dispersion of the data, indicating how spread out the ratings are.

The researchers used multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to test the hypotheses. This method enables multiple dependent variables to be analysed simultaneously (Otu & Omeje, 2021). This is particularly useful when the dependent variables are correlated or interrelated. In the MANCOVA, the researchers reported  $F$ -tests,  $P$ -values and partial ETA squared.

$F$ -tests compare the variance of the dependent variables between the different groups or conditions, while  $P$ -values indicate the significance of those differences. Partial ETA squared measures the effect of the treatment on the dependent variables, quantifying the proportion of the variance that is attributable to the treatment.

At 0.05 probability level, the hypotheses were considered significant. This level of significance is typically chosen in

scientific research as a threshold for deciding whether the observed effects are real and meaningful. A  $P$ -value of less than 0.05 indicates that there is less than a 5% chance that the observed results could be because of chance alone, providing confidence in the findings

## Results

Table 1 provides a breakdown of gender distribution in the treatment and control group. In the treatment group, there were 40 male participants (52.6%) and 36 female participants (47.4%). On the other hand, the control group consisted of 44 male participants (53.7%) and 38 female participants (46.3%).

Table 2 presents the mean ratings and SDs for the two groups at the pretest, post-test, and follow-up assessments. The treatment group and control group are shown to have different scores at each assessment. At pretest, the participants in both treatment and control groups had high mean ratings of irrational career beliefs, with values of 158.02 and 162.04, respectively. However, there was a significant difference between the groups. The SD of the treatment group was higher, indicating a wider range of scores within the group. At post-test, the participants in the treatment group experienced a reduction in their mean rating of irrational career beliefs, dropping to 44.80. However, the control group maintained their original high mean rating of 178.01. The SD of the treatment group also decreased, indicating a more uniform distribution of scores within the group. At the follow-up assessment, the treatment group participants demonstrated a further decrease in their mean rating of irrational career beliefs, reaching a value of 41.52. Conversely, the control group maintained its high mean rating of 160.59. The SD of the treatment group decreased again, indicating a more homogeneous distribution of scores.

Table 3 presents the mean ratings and SDs of the employability skills acquisition for the participants in the treatment and

**TABLE 1:** Participants' characteristics.

Gender	Treatment		Control		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Male	40	52.6	44	53.7	84	53.2
Female	36	47.4	38	46.3	74	46.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**TABLE 2:** Mean score of participants' irrational career beliefs at pretest, post-test and follow-up.

Group	Pre-test	Post-test	Follow-up
<b>Treatment</b>			
Mean	158.02	44.80	41.52
<i>n</i>	76.00	76.00	76.00
SD	38.77	4.87	3.05
<b>Control</b>			
Mean	162.04	178.01	160.59
<i>n</i>	82.00	82.00	82.00
SD	37.59	41.83	45.01

SD, standard deviation.

control groups at pre-test, post-test and follow-up assessments. At pretest, both groups showed relatively low mean ratings of 55.17 and 55.07, respectively. However, at the post-test, the participants in the treatment group experienced a significant increase in their mean rating of 145.30, while the participants in the control group maintained their low mean rating of 52.56. Furthermore, at the follow-up assessment, the treatment group participants continued to show a higher mean rating of 146.34 compared to the control group's mean rating of 53.93. This indicates that the participants in the treatment group continued to exhibit improved employability skills acquisition, while those in the control group showed no significant changes. Please note that the SD values have also been provided for each measurement to provide a measure of the spread or dispersion of the data.

According to Table 4, the statistical analysis conducted on the impact of RECC on employability skills acquisition among graduates revealed a significant effect. Specifically, the results indicated that RECC had a significant influence on employability skills acquisition at the post-test [ $F(1,157) = 13944.134, P = 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.989$ ] and follow-up [ $F(1,157) = 12104.574, P = 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.988$ ]. Consequently, hypothesis one, which proposed that RECC would have no significant effect on employability skills acquisition, was rejected.

**TABLE 3:** Employability skills mean scores.

Group	Pre-test	Post-test	Follow-up
<b>Treatment</b>			
Mean	55.17	145.30	146.34
<i>n</i>	76.00	76.00	76.00
SD	5.80	5.89	6.02
<b>Control</b>			
Mean	55.07	52.56	53.93
<i>n</i>	82.00	82.00	82.00
SD	3.57	3.42	4.35

SD, standard deviation.

**TABLE 4:** Results of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance showing the effectiveness of rational emotive career coaching on employability skills acquisition.

Source	Dependent variable	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta squared
Corrected Model	ESAS Post-test	339319.714†	4	84829.929	3716.060	< 0.001	0.990
	ESAS Follow-up	337031.719‡	4	84257.930	3218.255	< 0.001	0.988
Intercept	ESAS Post-test	9061.945	1	9061.945	396.968	< 0.001	0.722
	ESAS Follow-up	10521.087	1	10521.087	401.856	< 0.001	0.724
ESAS pretest	ESAS Post-test	11.058	1	11.058	0.484	0.487	0.003
	ESAS Follow-up	7.841	1	7.841	0.300	0.585	0.002
Group	ESAS Post-test	318315.602	1	318315.602	13944.134	< 0.001	0.989
	ESAS Follow-up	316912.797	1	316912.797	12104.574	< 0.001	0.988
Gender	ESAS Post-test	4.560	1	4.560	0.200	0.656	0.001
	ESAS Follow-up	246.482	1	246.482	9.414	0.003	0.058
Group interaction with Gender	ESAS Post-test	29.000	1	29.000	1.270	0.261	0.008
	ESAS Follow-up	0.120	1	0.120	0.005	0.946	0.000
Error	ESAS Post-test	3492.672	153	22.828	-	-	-
	ESAS Follow-up	4005.730	153	26.181	-	-	-
Total	ESAS Post-test	1834677.000	158	-	-	-	-
	ESAS Follow-up	1870449.000	158	-	-	-	-
Corrected total	ESAS Post-test	342812.386	157	-	-	-	-
	ESAS Follow-up	341037.449	157	-	-	-	-

ESAS, employability skills acquisition scale; *df*, degrees of freedom; Sig., significance.

†, *R* squared = 0.990 (Adjusted *R* squared = 0.990); ‡, *R* squared = 0.988 (Adjusted *R* squared = 0.988).

The findings supported the conclusion that RECC indeed had a positive effect on employability skills acquisition among graduates.

Furthermore, Table 4 also revealed that gender had no significant interaction effect on the impact of RECC on employability skills acquisition at either the post-test [ $F(1,157) = 1.270, P = 0.261, \eta_p^2 = 0.008$ ] or follow-up [ $F(1,157) = 0.005, P = 0.946, \eta_p^2 = 0.000$ ]. Therefore, hypothesis two, which suggested the absence of a significant interaction effect of gender on the impact of RECC, was not rejected. This suggests that the impact of RECC on employability skills acquisition among graduates was similar irrespective of gender.

## Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that there is considerable evidence to indicate that many graduates possess irrational career beliefs. These beliefs not only hinder their career development but also prevent them from acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to become employable. One prominent example is the belief that graduates are weak and prone to making mistakes in their careers. This perception undermines their confidence and hinders their ability to take risks and challenge themselves. By subscribing to this belief, graduates may avoid pursuing opportunities that could potentially enhance their skills and make them more employable. Furthermore, many graduates hold the belief that it is not proper to make a career decision that is outside the family's expectation.

This constraint, imposed by societal expectations or familial pressure, can limit their autonomy and prevent them from exploring their true interests and passions. As a result, graduates may settle for careers that do not match their true potential, leading to dissatisfaction and underachievement.

In addition to these irrational beliefs, some graduates also hold unrealistic expectations regarding the job search process. They may believe that securing a job should be effortless or that they should quickly land their dream job upon graduation. These unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointment and frustration, as the job market can be competitive, and it takes time to develop the necessary skills and gain experience. Other beliefs may include fear of failure, perfectionism or being overwhelmed by competition. By addressing these irrational thoughts, RECC helps graduates challenge and reframe their mindset.

This finding supports the previous finding that also indicated that individuals are faced with irrational career beliefs (Ogbuanya et al., 2018b; Otu & Omeje, 2021). One of the key aspects of RECC is identifying and disputing negative beliefs. Through a series of exercises and discussions, graduates are encouraged to examine and question the validity of their beliefs. This self-reflection helps individuals identify irrational thoughts and replace them more realistically. In addition to challenging negative beliefs, RECC also focusses on developing employability skills. These skills are essential for success in the job market and include communication, problem-solving, adaptability and teamwork, among others. Graduates are provided with practical strategies and techniques to enhance these skills and make them more marketable.

In this research, the investigators discovered a significant impact of RECC on the employability skills of graduates. The findings revealed that there is a notable difference in the employability skills acquisition mean scores of graduates who underwent RECC compared to those who received the usual-care programme. The RECC, as used in this study, refers to a structured intervention that focusses on promoting rational thinking and positive emotional well-being. It aims to equip graduates with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in their chosen careers. By incorporating rational thinking and emotional awareness, this coaching approach aims to equip graduates with the necessary mindset to navigate the professional world effectively. The findings of this study suggest that graduates who underwent RECC experienced a significant improvement in their employability skills. These skills encompass a range of abilities that enable individuals to achieve their goals in the workplace. In today's competitive job market, employability skills have become increasingly important, as they can differentiate graduates who have the necessary abilities from those who may not. By examining the mean scores of employability skills acquisition, the researchers were able to quantify the impact of RECC. The findings indicated that graduates who participated in the rational emotive coaching programme showed significantly higher scores compared to those who underwent the usual-care programme. This highlights the unique advantages of this coaching approach in enhancing the employability skills of graduates.

These findings support the previous findings that the REBT principle has been effective in leadership training and acquisition of life skills (Banks, 2011; Grieger & Fralick, 2007). The findings also support Ghazali and Bennett (2017) who found that soft skills are important dimensions of graduate employability. The findings are in line with Jackson's (2013) assertion that employability skills include team working, communication, self-management, analysis and critical thinking, specific job skills, adaptive skills, transferable skills and self-reliance skills.

Besides, the findings support the view that employability skills acquisition involves the act of getting general and specific skills that are needed by employers of labour (Ju et al., 2012). Furthermore, the findings support the view that if individuals are allowed to acquire relevant skills needed for self-sustenance in the economy, it will promote their charisma in any work environment (Douli, 2002). Therefore, participating in RECC makes not only the graduates employable, but it will also make them effective when they are employed.

However, the study also examined whether there was any significant interaction effect between gender and the impact of RECC on employability skills acquisition. The interaction effect refers to whether the relationship between RECC and employability skills acquisition differs significantly based on the gender of the participants. After analysing the data, the researchers found that gender had no significant interaction effect on the impact of RECC on employability skills acquisition. This means that the observed positive impact of RECC on employability skills acquisition was consistent across both males and females. This finding is significant because it suggests that RECC programmes can provide equal opportunities for all graduates, regardless of their gender. It suggests that RECC does not disproportionately benefit one gender over another in terms of employability skill development. Furthermore, the absence of a significant interaction effect suggests that RECC is effective in promoting employability skills among individuals from different genders. This supports the notion that RECC is not gender specific and can benefit individuals from diverse backgrounds. These findings support the previous finding that students are employed to use their gender studies knowledge and skills (Werner & Lundberg, 2016). Supporting UNESCO's (2003) view of gender as roles and responsibilities men and women have, women and men need to gain skills that will make them effective in workplaces. Thus, the employability skills established in the present are acquirable by both men and women.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, RECC has been found to have a positive impact upon the employability skills acquisition of graduates, regardless of their gender. This coaching approach emphasises cognitive-behavioural strategies and the exploration of emotions, allowing for a more holistic understanding of oneself and one's career path. Rational emotive career coaching



can greatly enhance the graduates' chances of securing employment. This conclusion reinforces the importance of investing in career coaching initiatives as a means of supporting graduates in developing their employability skills and preparing them for the challenges of the job market.

The significance of this finding extends beyond the graduates who participated in the study. It suggests that RECC holds potential as a valuable intervention for educational institutions and employers. If this coaching approach is incorporated into the graduates' education curriculum and career development programmes, educational institutions can equip graduates with the essential skills they need to thrive in today's fast-paced job market. Employers, on the other hand, can benefit from hiring graduates who possess these enhanced employability skills, as they are more likely to contribute to the organisation's success.

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## Authors' contributions

Both the authors contributed immensely to the completion of the manuscript. M.S.O. contributed to conceptualisation, visualisation, data collection, data analysis, instrument development and validation, writing of drafts and review of literature. M.M.S. contributes to conceptualisation, supervision, funding, literature review, draft review, instrument validation, trial testing, visualisation, proofreading and English editing. Other aspects of the manuscript not mentioned here were jointly handled.

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## Data availability

The research data can be obtained upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, M.S.O.

## Disclaimer

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