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Challenges Faced by International Students Studying in the United Kingdom with Main Focus on Nigerian Students

Abstract

The rationale for this research paper is to examine the challenges faced by international students with focus on Nigerian students embracing the British education system and impact on their motivation and academic performance. The paper presents a critical overview in relation to the barriers faced by Nigerian students in terms of obtaining and maintaining their visas, seeking employment, cultural integration, and access to education and how these challenges impact on their motivation and academic performance. The study utilizes both quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by Nigerian students in regard to studying in the UK and keeping up to visa requirements with limited working hours given to study. To ascertain the degree of impact, a primary data was carried out to hear from few of the students. Findings of research shows that majority of the Nigerian students that came to study in the UK had high expectations with the hope that coming to study and work in the UK was the best option to escape from the problem of high unemployment and hardship faced back in their home countries. Some expressed the disappointments on how they struggled to find accommodation with family and not sure if coming to the UK was worth the money, they paid to facilitate their study visa. The most disappointed expectations were the cost of living and not being able to get the twenty hours jobs allowed to work while studying to help them with excessive cost of living. Some felt that more support is needed to help international students in their studies in the UK considering the high fees paid to gain British education.

Keywords: international students, Nigerian students in the UK, language barriers, cultural shock, racism, discrimination, pedagogical differences

Introduction

Nigeria has a long history of ties with the British education system, dating back to its colonial period and has consistently ranked among the top countries as sending students to study overseas. Most of the Nigerian students aspire to pursue their education in the United Kingdom (UK) to access the renowned British education system. However, this transition is not without its challenges as majority of these Nigerian students encounter numerous challenges as they study and work part time to pay their fees which is part of the requirements for their visa renewal. In order to study and work, most of the student face significant challenges that demotivate them which impact on their studies and mostly their academic performance and in some cases attendance, regardless of the Home office police of regular attendance to the lessons to justify their visas, some still

derail due to series of challenges faced in their studies. This critical paper will aim to identify and analyse the key challenges that Nigerian students encounter when embracing the British education system ranging from cultural shock and adjustments, language barriers, economic and financial, racism and discrimination and pedagogical differences.

Literature review

Studying abroad has become increasingly popular among Nigerian students seeking quality education and global exposure. This critical analysis examines the challenges that Nigerian students face while studying in the UK by drawing from literature and theoretical concepts.

Cultural shock and adjustments to education system is one of the key challenges that face Nigerian students in relation to cultural adjustments when transitioning to the British education system. Studies have highlighted the challenges associated with adapting to a different language, educational practices, and social norms (Adekeye, 2012). It is therefore important to identify required adjustments needed in Nigerian students' communication and learning patterns that may hinder their academic success. The high expectations and feeling of belonging have imposed a big problem for Nigerian students. A language barrier and communication skill is one of the key challenges. The language proficiency to study in the UK is crucial for academic success in the British education system, although most Nigerians have English as their first language, but the ascent can be a big barrier in the classroom and may make some to struggle with English language skills, which is the primary medium of instruction in the UK, hence can impact understanding. According to Adeyemo (2018), many Nigerian students have limited exposure to English language usage in their home countries, making it challenging for them to adapt to the British education system, particularly those from the rural areas of Nigeria whom English is their second language. English may be the official language in both the UK and Nigeria, but there are still linguistic challenges faced by Nigerian students studying in the UK. According to Eze et al. (2019), differences in accents, dialects, and colloquial usage can make it difficult for Nigerian students to communicate effectively, impacting their social integration and academic success.

Another noted problem identified in the literature is economic challenges. One of the significant challenges is the economic burden faced by Nigerian students in the UK as identified by Muhyi (2020). The high tuition fees, visa costs, and living expenses place a considerable financial strain on Nigerian students, hence impacts their academic performance with worries of getting money to pay their fees on time, coupled with exchange rate of Nigerian naira to pounds, means raising huge amount of naira to get equivalent of pounds to offset fees in pounds. The economic factor often limits access to certain opportunities and influences their overall experience overseas. The challenge does not limit to Nigerian students, it also applies to other international students, non-EU students also face the financial crisis in their studies in the UK with high cost of fees and accommodation compared to the UK students and same is of Schneider (2016), also, Kew (2016) with the notion that the financial strain and lack of robust financial aid options contribute to stress and anxiety related challenges among international students. This is obviously true in terms of Nigerian students that face similar financial stress, and in most cases, some have gone back home voluntarily as they cannot cope or being deported due to non-payment of fees as one of the criteria for renewal of visa is linked to payment of fees.

Social integration is a crucial aspect of the study abroad experience for Nigerian students. Nigerian students face difficulties connecting with others due to cultural differences that impact on their behaviour to withdraw from socialising and engaging (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2017). The contact hypothesis, as a theoretical framework, suggests that increased interaction between different ethnic groups can lead to improved understanding and harmony. Most of Nigerian students are reserved and find it difficult to mix easily until they get to know their peers very well. The time it takes them to mix and interact takes longer and can hinder their group activities and learning from others. Other researchers have also contributed to some of the social integration faced by international students, Marginson and Sawir (2005) of which Nigerian students face the same in relation to joining clubs, societies, sports and other social activities due to intimidation, inability to socialise and discrimination faced in these social activities, hence some find it reluctant to belong.

Racism and discrimination are noted in the British education system and impacts on Nigerian students as some often experience incidents of racism and discrimination due to their ethnicity (Ojo, 2020), mostly the stereotyping Nigerians. These challenges not only affect their psychological well-being but can also hinder their academic performance. The concept of racial macroaggressions can help explain the subjective experiences of Nigerian students facing subtle forms of racism both in the universities and job offers to earn money to support their education with the 20 hours allowed to work. Some face housing issues as some landlords may not offer accommodation regardless of the fact that they can pay which leaves some stranded, hence impacts on attendance and achievement, yet these students have already paid huge tuition fees to gain qualifications to institutions. In some cases, some students opted for university accommodation; however, this can be expensive and unaffordable.

The challenges of pedagogical differences in teaching and learning methods can significantly have impact on Nigerian students. The traditional Nigerian education system focuses on rote memorization and teacher-centred instruction, while the British system places emphasis on critical thinking and independent learning (Ibidapo, 2014). This shift requires Nigerian students to adjust their teaching and learning and assessment styles to accommodate the British system of education geared to more interactive and research-based system that obtains in most of the university education in the UK. For instance, some Nigerian students struggle to complete course work as they were mainly assessed through examination, whereas in the UK education system, time constrained, essays and reports are the means of assessments and can be very challenging to Nigerian students. In any case, once settled, they are happy and ready to adjust, but still a big challenge to cope with it all leading to some stress and in some cases, failing the course that can lead to withdrawal or repatriation back to home countries with no qualifications.

Financial constraints can often pose a barrier for Nigerian students pursuing education in the UK. This also applies to other international students' studying in the UK. High cost of tuition fees, cost of living expenses and accommodation can be very costly; particularly those studying in inner London areas, with limited access to scholarships can limit their opportunities and hinder their academic progress (Adekeye, 2012). These challenges may force students to work long hours outside of their studies, adversely affecting their academic performance and overall experience. Some face high cost of accommodation and most cases cannot find suitable accommodation when they come with their families, some end up in bed and breakfast accommodation which can

be very expensive. These challenges result to some lack of concentration in their studies and can lead to poor attendance or failure to persist on the programme.

Inadequate institutional support and guidance can further enhance the challenges faced by Nigerian students. Literature discussed also suggests that some Nigerian students may lack adequate academic counselling, mentoring, and support services, which are crucial for successful education transition. The lack of adequate support may result in students feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Supporting students with language or cultural issues may require additional resources for the institutions, hence may not be fully accessible to the students particularly since after the pandemic as most institutions have reverted to hybridization in delivery.

The question is how Nigerian students are supported to cope with all of these challenges and impact on their motivation to achieve their degrees to which they left their home countries.

Theoretical framework

Motivational theories such as content theories (Maslow Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg Two Factor theory) as well as the Process theories (Expectancy and Equity) can help us address the question on how the identified problems can motivate students if all is well and can demotivate them when the going is tough as the case maybe with some of the Nigerian students. These theories are relevant in finding out how motivation can aid to students achieving their degree when motivated with the basic needs and expectations in their studies. Working hard is dependent on energy, commitment, and motivation. For Nigerian students to keep up to their study expectations and sustain excellent performance, their motivation must be increased through university support. Motivation is an invisible engine that drives individual attitudes and behaviours that leads to higher performance and this multifaceted force according to Kanfer et al. (2017), encompasses the psychological processes that spark, steer and fuel our actions towards converted goals.

Maslow (1970) highlights the importance of meeting the basic needs of life and it is on fulfilment of these needs that human beings feel happy to perform, absence of these needs will lead to non-achievement. Therefore, it is obvious that when a student cannot meet the basic needs of life during studies, motivation to concentrate in studies will diminish as the energy will be diverted to worries and looking for job to make the ends meet.

Motivation to achieve a degree is based on meeting the basic needs of life such as the psychological, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation, the absence of these will lead to students not being able to do well to achieve their academic success. Nigerian students that aspire to study overseas such as in the UK obviously can achieve their goals on satisfaction of the psychological needs. Discrimination is one of the challenges faced by some Nigerian students and when human beings sense that the need for belonging is absent, those affected will derail which may have negative impact on completing their programmes.

Passing the programme means being able to meet the basic needs of life of which engaging in part time work allowed under the immigration rules can help them to earn money while studying. The denial of the job will mean that those students who depend on working part time and studying to earn extra money to meet the basic needs of life, will obviously not be able to do so, hence the motivation to study will not be sustained.

However, one of the limitations of this theory is that individual motivation differs and may not apply to all Nigerian students with different needs while studying in the UK.

Effective support systems play a vital role in mitigating the challenges faced by Nigerian students. However, literature suggests that universities in the UK may not always provide adequate support systems for international students (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018). The social capital theory highlights the importance of social networks and institutional support in facilitating successful integration and academic achievement. The problem with this theory is that most of the students feel subdued and find it difficult to mix as some feel discriminated due to language barriers and therefore do not socialise.

Herzberg (1959) theory also helps us to understand some of the work challenges faced by Nigerian students studying in the UK. Herzberg's two factor theory helps us to answer the question raised on why some of these students go back home without achieving. There are several reasons to this such as unconducive study environment that can lead to dissatisfaction as in the theory of Herzberg motivation, known as hygiene factors, that can affect students such as university policy, interpersonal relationship with teachers and fellow students due to cultural differences that can demotivate if not willing to accept the cultural differences studying with others from different cultural backgrounds, this can lead to academic challenges faced by Nigerian students. Getting a part time paid job is a big challenge and some that are lucky to get a part time job face challenges of job insecurity because they are on student visa, most employers want full time staff and jobs may be targeted and offered to those without visa issues. Not only that, but some also have problems getting good jobs hence they make do with what jobs offered leading to job dissatisfaction.

Methodology

The research has considered qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection using WhatsApp group interviews to small group of Nigerian students studying in 3 UK universities with 5 students selected from each of the universities making a total of 15 targeted participants, comprising 8 female and 7 male students that volunteered to take part in the survey with no prejudice. The small group target participants were enough to present the comments below which is sufficient for the mini research derived from the first stage of this work on challenges faced by international students studying in the UK. Data analysis is presented using thematic analysis based on participants' comments which is presented in consideration to confidentiality as reassured to the participants that their names will not be mentioned in presenting the data. Questions were based around the key challenges derived from the literature review.

Findings and analysis

The findings indicate that 9 out of the 15 participants have had financial challenges in their studies in one way or another. Some agreed to financial stress faced in paying their fees and high cost of living in the UK that they never expected causing some stress and worries of future of unknown leading to academic failures or poor performance and in some cases being sent home as stated by one of the students commented that her friend was withdrawn from her programme in the second year of her course due to non-payment of the fees and her visa was withdrawn.

Majority of the participants found homesickness and sense of isolation as their key challenges and this is in line with the findings of Ward et al. (2001), which emphasis the experience and feeling of homesickness and isolation due to being far away from their families, hence in some cases need some support to cope with it all. Same applies to the students interviewed in these universities. The key findings of the survey will fully be presented in future research on challenges faced by Nigerian students studying in the UK. However, the comments share is an indication of the truth about the challenges faced by Nigerian students as well as other international students studying overseas. It is important that more support is given to support these students as their future also lies in gaining British education regarded highly in their home countries for better job opportunities, which is why their parents and sponsors invest hedge amount of their money in British education for a better future for Nigerian students.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Nigerian students studying in the UK are rooted in economic factors, cultural adjustment, language barriers, social integration, racism, and the available support systems. To address these challenges, it is crucial to develop targeted support programs and policies that aid Nigerian students' integration into the British education system. Some of the support systems will vary from individual needs, such as referral for counselling in terms of missing home, visa issues, tapping into emergency funds to support those in financial crisis, welfare role for well-being, stress and mental health challenges will help support Nigerian students. Coupled with the fact that they also help boost British economy as studying in the UK brings money to the universities and the entire UK education institutions.

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