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Academic migration in context: narrating the lived experiences and sustainable livelihoods of Nigerian migrant academics in the United Kingdom

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Samson Adewumi

*Graduate School of Business Leadership, Cnr Janadel and,
Alexandra Ave, Midrand, 1686. Midrand,
University of South Africa
Email: adewus@unisa.ac.za*

Abstract

The study interrogates the lived experiences and sustainable livelihood of Nigerian migrant academics in the United Kingdom (UK). 28 Nigerian migrant academics were recruited through referrals for interviews. The NVivo (v.12) software was employed for themes' identification. Migration routes include studies, direct faculty employment and visa sponsorship, postdoctoral research fellowship, research assistance, and research visits respectively. Nigerian migrant academics' attempts at establishing a sense of belonging and integration were challenged by systemic discrimination and exclusion, value systems and norm differences, acculturation issues, and workplace cultures of the UK Higher Education (HE). Environmental change sustainability, financial capital sustainability, social and emotional well-being sustainability were the sustainability issues identified. The study echoes for the prioritization of

Nigeria's HE sectors where the conditions and environment of work will be improved to dissuade the out-migration of Nigerian academics.

Keywords: *Academics, Higher education, migration, Nigerians, sustainability, vulnerability, diaspora*

Introduction

The concept of migrant academics is conceived as foreign-born academics employed by a university to teach or conduct research on permanent or contract terms (Coey, 2018). Foreign-born academics make up a third of the UK academics with a large number from the developing countries (Pustelnikovaite & Chillasand, 2022). Nigerian-born migrants are immensely part of the UK academia, and the number keeps rising with the massive out-migration of Nigerian academics (Ajayi & Luckay, 2023). The idea of academic migration is particularly thought of as beneficial to the individual academic and harmful in terms of brain drain and talent extinctions to the country of migration. The lack of clear statistics on the estimates of Nigerian academic migration trends has further compounded the challenges of brain drain and development in Nigeria's HE sectors. Exposure to uncertainties has characterized the migration of many academics in recent times.

The Nigerian HE situation has continued to provoke the need for academic migration to other climes for improved working conditions and capacity development support (Okolo & Gregory, 2016). For instance, the government's continued neglect of revitalizing Nigeria's HE sectors in the areas of funding, improved welfare and infrastructure development are among other reasons for the increase in out-migration of Nigeria's academic talents (Ololube et al., 2016). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) recommendations of 4-6 % of the national budget to sustainable education development has continuously been neglected by the Nigeria government with the recent 3.52trillion naira allocation to education from the 49.7trillion naira proposed 2025 budget (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). This estimate represents only 1.7 percent of the total budget and exudes poor commitment to the development of education in Nigeria. The culture of academia in Nigeria is characterized by several challenges including poor working conditions, welfare and low remuneration not commensurate with the growing impact of inflation, and training and development constraints among others (Ajayi & Luckay, 2023). Many Nigerian academics have become victims and

vulnerable to the implications of a decaying working atmosphere compared to their counterparts in other parts of the developing countries. Nigerian academics remain poorly remunerated and supported among other contemporaries like South Africa, Ghana, and Egypt (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). While many have been taking rescue in migrating, others have resorted to extra jobs to cushion the effects of poor conditions of work including trading and largely extorting students for survival (Ajayi & Luckay, 2023). The UK case is justified as one of the destinations of migration for developing countries, especially Nigerians. The recent UK policy on postgraduate studies has seen an increase in the number of Nigerians migrating to the UK for studies with accompanied spouses. For instance, in 2023 a total of 141,000 Nigerians were granted study with over 60 percent migrating with their spouses (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

There is a growing body of literature on academic migration signaling a departure from the conventional discussions on migration studies. A few of these studies include academic migration and epistemological value: exploring the experience of migrants academic in Portugal (Oliveira et al., 2023), locked out, locked in and stuck: exploring migrants' academic experience of moving to the United Kingdom (Pustlenikovaite, 2021), “Knowledge migrants” or “economic migrants” patterns of academic mobility and migration from Southern Europe to Mexico (Mendoza et al., 2019). Others include academic mobility, language, and cultural capital: the experience of transnational academics in British HE institutions (Pherah, 2021) and international academic mobility and inequalities (Bilecen & van Mol, 2027). However, there are hardly any studies that have focused on the migration of Nigerian academics to the UK. This gap will contribute to the academic migration literature. This paper explores the pattern and route of Nigerian academics' migration to the UK, an interrogation of the sense of belonging and integration challenges, and sustainable livelihoods as migrant academics.

The contribution of this study to extant literature is the attempts to understand the lived experiences and sustainable livelihoods of Nigerian migrant academics in the UK- a sparse attempt in the migration literature. While available studies on academic migration are still under-researched, drawing from the Nigerian migrant's context will provide some clarity and situations of the lived experiences and sustainable living of other African migrant academics who migrated from the vulnerable working conditions of the academia in their respective countries.

The Nigeria higher education-university education in perspective

Economic advancements are often driven by knowledge and capacity utilization emerging from HE systems. The capacity of HE systems in most developing nations, Nigeria inclusive, has been hindered consistently by economic and political problems (Ololube et al., 2016). HE of learning has been considered the grounding of all knowledge acquisition that seeks to distinguish nations in the areas of economic, social innovation, and technological growth (Akor, 2022). Yaba Higher College was the first HE of learning in Nigeria with its first enrolment in 1934, however, the University of Ibadan, established in 1948 was considered as the first higher education in the category of university in Nigeria (Ahaotu & Ogunode, 2021). At the birth of Nigeria's independence in 1960, two additional universities were created in the year 1962-the University of Lagos and the Ahmadu Bello University respectively (Okolo & Gregory, 2016).

Nigeria's HE has undergone several reforms and policy implementation provoking the creation of more universities to cater to the growing number of students enrolment across the country. For instance, the inability of Federal Universities to cushion the increasing demands of university education triggered the ushering in of private universities in the mid-1990s (Ahaotu & Ogunode, 2021). With this entrance, universities in the HE sector have continued to grow proportionally with a total of 273 universities as of the second quarter of 2024- including 62 Federal Universities, 63 State Universities, and 148 Private Universities (National Universities Commission-NUC, 2024). These distributions clearly show that the responsibility of managing HE that initially rested with the government has unarguably been taken by private investors, thus, culminating in the fast decay of Federal and State universities in Nigeria.

HE in Nigeria has continued to undergo several challenges. For instance, there are issues related to misappropriation of fund for quality teaching and research in most government-owned universities, leaving doubt on the sincerity of government to manage Federal and State-owned universities (Ahaotu & Ogunode, 2021). University education in Nigeria is challenged by the inability to match the increasing students' enrolment with available funding. The ratio of public expenditure per student has dropped extensively, and this has contributed to the deterioration of government-owned universities in Nigeria (Akor, 2022). On the contrary, public spending or allocation per university student in

Nigeria is considerably higher compared to other developing countries, revealing the inefficiency and mismanagement of public funds (Ogunode et al., 2022). The challenge of funding also extends to the provision of an environmentally friendly research and teaching atmosphere for academics.

The situation of university education in Nigeria leaves so much in doubt about the future of Nigerian education sector, and the economic survival of academics who form the fabric of its existence. For others, survival means migration to other climes where skills and talents are rewarded. The challenge of brain drain has continued to affect the management and growth of Nigeria's HE. The last decade has seen the highest migration of academics from major Nigerian universities to other universities overseas (Ogunode et al., 2022). While some migrated to other developing countries in Africa like South Africa, Namibia, Ghana, and Botswana among others, others have chosen a different route like the United States of America, Australia, Canada, and the most migration destination being the UK (Ajayi & Luckay, 2023). The choice of the UK as the destination of migration comes with the high influx of students' enrolment across major UK universities in the last five years, thus, necessitating the demands for academics (Ikechuckwu & George, 2023).

Academic migration: context, issues, and challenges

Migrant academics abroad are commonly described as better performers than the local academics concerning the quality and quantity of research outputs (Bauder et al., 2018). Thus, only committed and performing migrant academics are potentially getting opportunities abroad for faculty positions. The contextual understanding of the international mobility of academics should also reflect on the factors that motivate migrants' academic migration intentions. The niche of the conceptualization of academic migration draws mostly from the economic point in terms of evaluating the cost and benefits implications of the decision to migrate (Van der Wende, 2015). Some of the pull and push factors identified in the literature include career advancements, the desire to access improved infrastructure and professional growth, and exposure to more advanced research climes where competency and excellence are supported and rewarded (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017). Although, academics migrate to different parts of the world in search of the "desired", however, the peculiarities of these desires are more likely

to be met by some countries than others. For instance, the UK, the US, Canada, and more recently Australia are more attractive destinations of choice for migrant academics (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017).

The literature, however, gives an account of the positives of academic migration on many grounds (Hutchison, 2016; Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017). While it is often perceived that the international mobility of academics comes with some level of investment in terms of labour market absorptions, this does not always seem so in other instances (Jepsen et al., 2014). Many migrant academics are not fully recognized in their destination countries, with questions on the value of their foreign qualifications and skills (Pherali, 2012). Employers in the country of destination often consider migrants' academic expertise lower compared to the locals, even when the former possess more advanced qualifications and expertise (Mendoza et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that international mobility of academics could enhance the decline of their local social networks and ties which are relevant for gaining opportunities for new jobs (Cañibano & Woolley, 2015; Okunade & Awosusi, 2023).

The challenges of international migration for academics have been on the increase with the continued proliferation and neo-liberal policies of HE, especially from the Global North. The migrant's academic literature has continued to report issues related to underpaid work, despite the competitive advanced degree, skills, and expertise of most migrants' academics (Oliveira et al., 2023). Other include poor working conditions, lack of commitment to the escalating trend of discrimination, limited community of association and integration, loneliness, and absence of academic freedom (Awosusi, 2023). The sustainable livelihoods of many migrant academics have remained a subject of continuous interrogation (Courtois & Sautier, 2022). For instance, the total number of academics in the UK is made of 30 percent migrant academics, with many employed on contract fixed terms without pensions and other employment benefits (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017).

Migrant academics literature reveals different narratives on the experiences of migrant academics. While some studies revealed the ability of migrants' academics as drivers of knowledge initiators and transfers (Amagoh & Rahman, 2016; Bauder, 2015), others conceived migrant academics as intellectual narrowness, arguing however, that the experiences of migrant academics are relative, conditional, and are either positive or negative (Gerhard et al., 2018; Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018).

Many migrant academics are constrained by the lack of options in either moving forward or downward in their careers because of institutional and cultural limitations (Jöns, 2011). Women are often less likely to migrate as academics because of cultural and social norms, particularly those attributed to family responsibilities and nurturing (Bauder, 2015; Okunade & Bakare, 2020; Luxon & Peelo, 2009).

The work arrangement of many migrant academics is usually on contract fixed terms, and the possibility of renewal or conversion to permanent positions is often hindered by institutional and labour market policies (Bauder et al., 2018). While the situation for many migrant academics cannot be the same, this article interrogates the possible negative situation of the lived experiences and sustainable livelihoods of migrant academics.

The vulnerability of Nigerian migrant academics: theoretical perspectives

The conceptual understanding of vulnerability has its roots and application across varied disciplines including Sociology, Psychology, and Migration studies. For instance, the Sociological perspective of academic migration seeks to understand the social structures, migration pattern and social experiences of migrant academics. The psychological dimension seeks to understand the emotional and social well-being that characterizes migration. The contextual clarification of vulnerability captures different approaches depending on the situational or structural analysis of the vulnerable circumstances (Bürkner, 2012; Hart, 2023). The idea of being vulnerable relates to some level of suffering associated with human conditions, such that the conditions are provoked by the individual or other actions (Brown et al., 2017). The implication of vulnerability has been widely infused into the study of migration in areas of child labour and women migration.

The context and living conditions also have some influences on the level of vulnerability that an individual may experience which is beyond the control of the individual. Migrant academics can be considered vulnerable on several levels sprouting from conditions beyond their control (economic, social, security, standard of living, HE infrastructure decay, and poor culture of teaching and research opportunities in many Nigerians HE institutions). With the consistent global change in migrant patterns and labour market dynamics, so is the urge to migrate by academics for improved opportunities around the world.

The vulnerability of migrant academics may also be conceived in a situational context (Ferrarese, 2016). For example, migrant academics vulnerability threshold might occur with the new and unfamiliar environment in which they migrate, the concern of safety and risk in their migration destination, the issue of discrimination and exclusion policy of the country of destination, social security concerns, and sustainable livelihood among others. While migrant academics are no doubt vulnerable in their country of destination, the level of vulnerability in their country of migration has often been the highlight (Busetta et al., 2021). Nigerian academics can be considered vulnerable because of the poor working conditions that have characterized the HE sectors, which may have triggered their migration intentions. The theoretical implication of the vulnerability discourse is aimed at understanding the vulnerability of academics in the context of leaving Nigeria amidst the growing economic hardships. However, the vulnerability assumption is criticized for emphasizing vulnerability in the context of the situational conditions of an individual or group of persons neglecting that vulnerability can be a lifelong condition.

Methodology

Adopted in this paper is the exploratory research design upon which the methodological guide of the study is built. The exploratory research design affords the possibility of contributing to the literature on the intersection between the lived experiences of academic migrants and sustainable livelihoods, particularly from the Nigerian perspective (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The population was essentially migrant academics of Nigerian descent purposively selected across the UK. The characteristics of the population include academics from diverse academic disciplines, including male and female academics (See Table 1). The characterization also includes features such as permanent and contract employees. One peculiar feature of the population established that most of the migrant academics are on contract employment terms. The total respondents that took part in the interviews were 28 Nigerian migrant academics. In tandem with the traditions of qualitative research, this sample size is considered appropriate to explore and provoke deep qualitative responses to the research problem (Yin, 2016).

Table 1: Respondents demographics

Demographics	Respondents
Gender	9 Female, 19 Male
Job description	3 Professor, 10 Senior Lecturers, 15 lecturers
Areas of discipline	10 Business/Management, 11 Social Sciences/Humanities, 7 Sciences
Duration in the country	16 (1-5 years), 12 (5-10 years)

The respondents were recruited through snowballing. Snowball sampling recruitment is often employed in the instance of extreme access to research respondents through initial identification of respondent(s) and subsequent referrals (Shields & Rangarajan, 2013). Recruiting Nigerian migrants' academics resident in the UK through snowballing is justified in this study as the researcher and respondents were on two separate continents of the world during this investigation. Besides, it is practically impossible to know a sizeable number of respondents by name or by acquaintances. The recruitment began with the identification and contact of two former colleagues who work as academics in the UK. More referrals were made by reaching out to their contacts to participate in the study.

Semi-structure interview with an interview guide containing the list of questions was employed to ensure the serial flow of questions and responses (Kumar, 2012). The interview process was conducted through telephone and Teams based on the preference of each respondent. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents. Different appointment dates were agreed for each interview, and each lasted for an average of 25-35 minutes. Before the interviews, the respondents were briefed about the aim of the study. The range of questions covered during the interview reflects three major issues including the pattern and routes of migration, establishing a sense of belonging and integration, and the challenges of sustainable livelihoods as migrants.

The credibility and transferability of the data were ensured by making sure that the opinions shared by the respondents are reflected in the results and established that the results can be transferable to another similar context if replicated. Also ensured was the dependability of the data by rigorously abiding by all ethical considerations during and after the data collection. Lastly, I ensured the confirmability of the data by ensuring that the data generated from the interview had a clear synergy with the results. The consent forms contained instructions on the voluntary participation of all respondents. The anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents were strictly concealed as names, and

other identifying information was not part of the information surveyed. The study was approved for ethical consideration by the Graduate School of Business Leadership Research Committee with reference number 2025-SBL-AC-027-SD-8077. NVivo (v.12) was employed to identify relevant themes and sub-themes from the transcribed interviews. This process was followed by the transcriptions of all interviews into text, thereafter, the texts were arranged in terms of the other research questions and coded on the NVivo software to generate themes that addressed the research questions. The identified themes were later analyzed, and major implications were inferred from these discussions.

Results

Figure 1. present the major and sub-themes that emerged from the NVivo analyses with subsequent discussion and explanations of the themes provided thereafter.

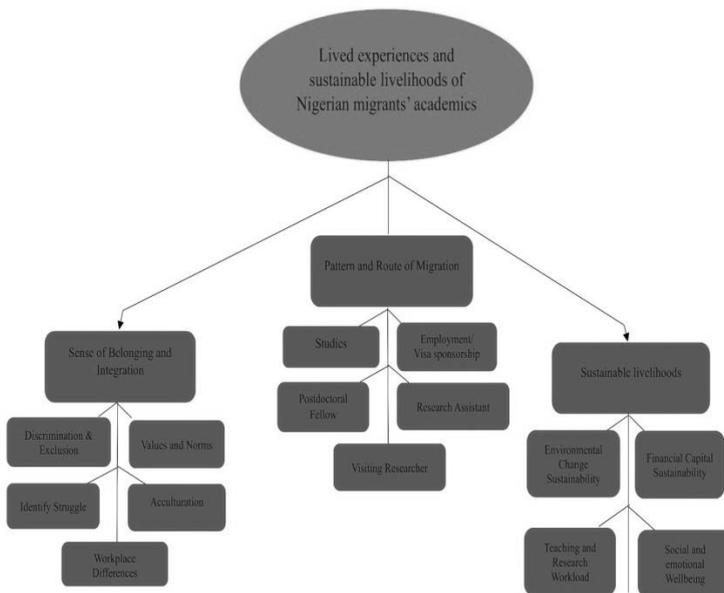


Figure 1: Lived experiences and sustainable livelihoods of Nigerian migrants' academics

Patterns and routes of migration

While there are varied lived experiences for different migrant academics, it is an incontestable fact that Nigerian academics continued to migrate irrespective of the positive and negative implications of these decisions. It was found that there are different types of migration routes for most migrant academics. Many of the respondents who later turned academics were former student migrants who either migrated alone to study or migrated with their spouses. One thing to note is that such an individual has had an advanced degree like a PhD before contesting in the highly competitive HE labour market. Timing also explains an important component of this migration route. For instance, the UK in the last 10 years opened her HE sectors and saw an influx of students into the country for studies, especially from the Global South. However, what remains important is the fact that the study route has remained the most utilized method for many migrant academics in the UK. The increasing influx of students as a choice of study destination has increased the demand for faculty positions in the UK.

I migrated to the UK as a migrant academic through the study route. What I did was to seek a Masters admission for my wife in one of the universities, even though I was already a PhD holder. My wife and I migrated and upon landing in the UK, she was in school I was out there working in a care home. While this was on, I kept applying for faculty positions since this was what I used to do in Nigeria. After a few applications, I got employed in the capacity of a lecturer at one of the UK universities, but obviously on a fixed contract term of 5 years.

Unlike the traditional study migration of spouses, the respondents migrated as single individuals and were prepared for the implications ahead. What seemed important for these individuals was to be able to penetrate the UK HE labour market. Therefore, the narration exudes a different pattern of study migration from what is conventionally known to be the practice, where spouses migrate together for study while the others hunt for academic jobs as it were.

I came here as a student migrant, even though I already have a PhD in Nigeria. After several attempts to get an academic position overseas without success, my friend introduced the UK to me, only on the condition that I must come in as a student and then start my academic job hunting while in the UK. While others might have a different

experience with this, I think it worked for me, and I am here today. I did not finish my studies before I got this job, and my conditions of stay were changed.

Many of the respondents who migrated through employment recounted that a good part of the relocation expenses was sponsored by the recruiting university. However, what remains clear is that not all these types of employment come with the desired expectations, as many migrant academics are recruited from overseas on contract fixed terms. The conversation that should be of interest is why any university spend so much on relocating migrant academics and still have them on fixed contracts. The answer is not far-fetched. As argued previously in the preceding paragraphs, the cost-cutting measures and precarious practices of HE in the UK are on the rise, and recruiting academics on demand to serve a very important purpose from overseas justifies this intention.

I was employed directly from Nigeria, unlike others. I saw an advert and I sent in my application. I got an interview invite which I prepared for and had the interview and was told I was successful. The university paid for some of my expenses, including for my family. But one thing I am sure of is that there is not much difference in the work description between myself who got employed directly from Nigeria, and those who did through other means because we are on fixed employment terms.

The recruitment of postdoctoral fellows (Postdoc) although not new in academia, recent trends have shown that postdoctoral fellows recruited to undergo research and development training are being employed in faculty positions at the end of their postdoctoral tenure. This practice, even though it is not common as many postdoctoral fellows often begin the search for faculty positions at the end of their fellowship, it is on record that a few of the postdoctoral fellows are often privileged to be offered faculty positions. From the perspective of the UK where postdoctoral fellowship programs are part of the HE culture of research advancement, a few of the respondents interviewed alleged that they were able to secure a faculty position on the completion of their postdoctoral fellowship.

I became a migrant academic through Postdoc. I had a three-year Postdoc appointment that was renewable yearly. I was residing in Nigeria before this appointment and had no affiliation with the UK

whatsoever. After the completion of my Postdoc, the most viable option available to me was to return to my job in Nigeria. Fortunately, my mentor approached me and told me about the opening and if I would be interested. I eventually applied and was given the job, although I had to do a 4-year contract before I was eventually made a permanent faculty member.

Research assistants are often employed to help with the management of data, including analysis and the overall management of projects. They are commonly employed by universities and situated to work in laboratories and other research spaces. This is not one of the common routes to becoming an academic in the UK, especially as there are sparse universities that employ the service of research assistance. What most universities do is admit PhD students, with additional paid responsibilities of research assistance. Few of the individuals interviewed argued that their migration journey to becoming an academic in the UK started with being initially employed as a research assistant from Nigeria. While becoming a migrant academic is unpopular with this route, the study found that some migrant academics of Nigerian origin were recruited into faculty positions as former research assistants.

My research assistant employment was for two years, and I started applying for academic positions in other universities in the UK before the completion of my contract. I knew this was the only means that would extend my stay in the UK, as I was not willing to go back to Nigeria. Although it is not common for people to get such an opportunity, I ended up with a fixed-term offer of five years as an academic. I did not finish that before I recently got permanent full-term employment.

The respondents explained that they ordinarily came to visit the UK as visiting researchers to conclude ongoing research and possibly lecture during their stay. What was initially thought to be visiting research turned out to be their migration story of becoming a migrant academic in the UK, as they were hired by their respective universities even before the completion of their visit. One of the respondents explained:

I only came here on a research visit, but I transitioned to become an academic after my research stay. The Head of the department offered me the opportunity and explained that my research and teaching niches align so well with that of the department, and they would want me to

consider staying back as an academic. The opportunity offered me the privilege of moving my family down to the UK.

Sense of belonging and integration

The integration challenge of acculturation forms a very important component of this conversation as respondents reiterated differences between the culture of the country of migration and the country of residence. For example, an individual who has lived up to an adult life in a different culture may find it difficult to assimilate into a new culture within a short space of time. The UK culture, among other things, is characterized by individualism where people mind their businesses and live individual lives, different from the typical African culture characterized by the spirit of *ubuntu* (humanity to others and looking out for others). Acculturation in terms of religion and faith practices represents another challenge of integration for migrant academics.

I am someone who loves to be around people and offer help in ways I could just to see people happy. I was shocked and surprised that this is not the case here as people mind their business. I have lived here for 7 years, and I am still struggling with this because where I come from it is different entirely. I still felt that I was not yet there and that this was going to take a long time to do.

Another migrant academic explained the challenge of acculturation and how it has been a constraint in terms of integrating fully into the UK culture.

I am very religious, but migration has taught me that religious practices are not the same everywhere. I migrated to the UK as an academic with the mindset that I would continue with my religious way of life. What is happening here is entirely different from Nigeria where I came from. In Nigeria, people seem to be more devoted to their religious faith and practices, unlike in the UK. I consider that one of the ways that I will be able to create a sense of belonging and integrate properly into the UK culture is through my religious practices as I will be meeting people of like minds in terms of faith.

The typical Nigerian value system upholds beliefs that are considered important in life, including respecting the older, getting quality and qualitative education, and most importantly being successful in terms of the accumulation of material wealth. On the contrary, for the UK, it

could mean being happy on an individualistic level and successful without necessarily being wealthy through material wealth. Many migrants tend to struggle with identity crises when faced with a different value system and norms in their country of residence. This reality frustrates many migrant academics with a sense of belonging and integration attempts.

I had come to the UK with a different mindset about value systems and norms. The value system I grew up in is one that upheld the belief that one needs to acquire all that is necessary in life including wealth to be happy and fulfilled, but I am seeing the contrary here in the UK. For instance, the value system here does not encourage one to have so much wealth to be a happy or fulfilled person. It is strange to me and contradicts my sense of belonging and my ability to navigate my paths in the UK culture.

Most of the fixed-term contract employment is reserved for migrant academics, even when they possess the minimum qualifications. While it is unarguably, the fact that discrimination is a global phenomenon, it is important to acknowledge that the degree and extent are different among countries and cultures. A particular respondent argued that he had previously thought of going back to Nigeria because of the continuous discrimination he witnessed. For instance, he had been working on contract terms while other locals were being employed on full employment terms despite his qualifications and experiences. While we can argue that the picture painted here is not exclusive, as other migrant academics might have a contrary story to tell, discrimination and exclusion must be stereotypes tied to the development of one's sense of belonging and identity integration.

There are times I thought of going back to Nigeria, but on second thought, Nigeria is nowhere going because of the economic and leadership situation there. I will only console myself and look out for the future. There are times that I have been intentionally excluded from an opportunity that I merit, and the same opportunity will be given to someone who does not have either the qualification or experience. I have mixed feelings when these things happen, but what can I do since I am a migrant who only came here to survive? There is no way I can have a good sense of belonging and try to have my way into integrating into the culture and way of life here since I have a burden somewhere.

Another respondent stated:

I have been employed for almost a 5year now on a fixed contract term as an academic and no one is talking about possible regularization. I have a PhD; a great research profile and I am still here working like a horse only on contract terms. Because of the kind of employment, I have, when an opportunity comes that could help me in the areas of my career development, I will be reminded that I am on contract, and I am not qualified.

Interrogating sustainable livelihoods

The poor governance and economic disruptions that have characterized the Nigerian economy for so long remain one of the driving factors for the massive out-migration in the country. Many migrants academically jettisoned their jobs in Nigeria for any academic or similar opportunities overseas. Those who used to have belief in the survival and viability of the Nigerian leadership are at the forefront of migration. The financial capital of many migrants is not sufficient to afford them a sustainable economic life. Migrant academics interviewed in this study complained of not being able to adequately take care of themselves and their family with the increasing level of inflation that has driven up the standard of living in the UK. While it is a reality that the Nigerian situation is no better, migrants argued that the cost of living in Nigeria is still within the realm of their economic power as a middle-income earner but lament the devastating situation in the UK where one is constrained with several bills.

I never envisaged this level of discomfort in my economic life. There is nowhere I can say I am living a sustainable life in terms of my financial capital and the several economic demands and responsibilities that come with it. I know Nigeria is no better, but I think this place is the worst. I cannot even save a penny at the end of the money as my salary goes into bills and others. I am a family of four, and it is hard, I can say I am living below the norm of sustainable livelihood.

Environmental change sustainability remains a fundamental component of sustainable livelihood. The difference in climate and weather conditions between Nigeria and the UK is no doubt astronomical, as the latter is fervently cold during winter. The unpredictability of the UK temperature (a response to climate change variation) often complicates

the sustainable living of many migrants academically. Migrant academics are used to the mild temperature of Nigeria; hence they find the extreme cold weather in the UK as disruptions to their sustainable living. The few migrants interviewed had similar experiences concerning the extreme weather conditions. One of them explained as follows:

I think when we are talking about sustainable livelihood, we should not only be picturing the economic power and access of the individual because having a difficult environment in terms of weather conditions to cope with is also part of sustainable living. Although I came here expecting that I would be faced with cold weather conditions as a migrant academic, I never expected the level of extremity I have witnessed.

Another respondent reiterated the complications of extreme weather and how it has been impacting the sustainable livelihood of his family.

Sustainable livelihood in terms of the environment and weather conditions is too harsh for me, and my family. I have young teens who are always ill whenever it's winter and I must be there for them. Aside from the fact that they are yet to adapt to the weather as migrants, I think the weather conditions are just too harsh. In this area of sustainable livelihood, my family and I are struggling, as there is a drastic difference in what we are used to before migrating to the UK.

The stress and emotional burnout that come with teaching and research workload are also sustainable livelihood constraints for many migrant academics. Academia is one of the professions with stressful work. While these responsibilities might be different across cultures, the UK case is no doubt strenuous with the high expectations from academics, particularly in terms of research and development. This expectation has continued to increase the stress and emotional burnout of many academics. The respondents argued that, as migrant academic much is expected from them in terms of these metrics, and they must do the same to keep tabs on their jobs.

I am struggling with my social and emotional well-being. I believe this is part of sustainable livelihood and it is missing in me as a migrant academic. I have a bulk of work from teaching and research that I must do without fail. You know when you are here to survive, even being on a fixed contract for that matter, you must comply because it is better

than where you come from where the government has messed up everything.

A female migrant academic adds to the above revelation with the following:

I know this issue of work-life balance is contentious in academia. As a woman academic, I have really been struggling to attain any sort of meaningful sustainable livelihood as I am often overwhelmed with the physical and emotional stress that comes with my job. I must teach throughout the week and still research to be able to keep my job. I still have a family to look out for as a woman. The situation here is real, and as a migrant academic, I am feeling the heat.

Discussion of findings

The study showed different migratory patterns of Nigerian migrant academics including the study routes (wherein one of the spouses searches for employment with advanced degrees like PhD while the other studies in the UK), direct employment, and visa sponsorship from the migrant home country, postdoctoral research fellowship routes, research assistance and visiting researcher routes. One common similarity between these migration patterns is the employment of Nigerian migrant academics on contracts. Although this is not peculiar to Nigerian academic nationals, the findings could explain the culture of the UK HE sectors in terms of the employment of migrants. While the need to survive and improve the standard of living of many migrants were reasons for migration, evidence from this study shows that there is a distinction between the work conditions of migrant academics before and after migration. These findings support existing studies in literature on the precarious state of the UK HE sectors, and the upsurge of migrant academics to support the increasing students' enrolments (Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018; Mendoza et al., 2019).

The paper demonstrates a sense of belonging issues that include systemic discrimination and exclusion from research development opportunities. While it is uncontested, the fact that HE globally is becoming precarious, findings from this study show that migrant academics (Nigerians) are frequently on contract employment terms in the UK. Again, while this is not sufficient for any possible generalization of all Nigerian migrants' academics in the UK, the fact established in this study supports other evidence on the precarious state of the UK HE

sectors (Oliveira et al., 2023). Differences in value systems and norms represent another sense of belonging and integration dilemma for many Nigerian migrants' academics. Many Nigerian migrants' academics encounter different adaptation challenges on their arrival to the UK. Thus, assimilating to a new culture has remained challenging for many Nigerian migrants' academics. There are peculiarities in the African and Western cultures (Ikechuckwu & George, 2023). Findings show that Nigerian migrants' academics were challenged by the 'individualistic' culture of the UK, in contrast with the culture of *ubuntu* known to Africans (Ahaotu & Ogunode, 2021).

The sustainable livelihood challenges of Nigerian migrants' academics include environmental change and sustainability challenges, financial capital sustainability, teaching and workload responsibility, and social and emotional well-being. The collection of these issues shows the state of livelihood of many Nigerian migrant academics, who in the search for improved living conditions are constrained by livelihood challenges (Awosusi, 2023; Ikechuckwu & George, 2023). One of the most significant is the concern of financial capital. Migrant academics lack the financial capital and muscles to live their desired lifestyles in the UK. While the expectations attached to migration by many is the improvement in their living conditions and lifestyles, the reality of Nigerian migrant academics explains a contrary expectation. Literature supports the poor sustainable livelihoods of migrants' academics in the UK (Pustelnikovaite & Chillasand, 2022).

The findings also support the vulnerability discourse. For instance, the situational conditions of academics, poor economic power, and the decaying context of Nigeria's HE explains the vulnerability of Nigerian academics. The vulnerability argument upholds the narrative that people in certain circumstances can become weak and vulnerable to uncertainties (Hart, 2023; Busetta et al., 2023). Putting this into context, the work conditions and environment of Nigeria HE institutions, the poor living conditions and welfare, decaying infrastructure, and capacity development initiatives of Nigerian universities are precipitators that explain the vulnerability of Nigerian academics, and this mostly portrays their migration intention. In other words, Nigerian academics are conceived as vulnerable to the pressure of social and economic status that are beyond their control.

Conclusion and policy implications

The precarious global state of HE institutions has continued to trigger academic migration, with increased sustainable threats to migrant academics. The Nigerian case exudes the poor management of HE institutions. The Nigerian government has continued to neglect the welfare and development of HE institutions resulting in consistent ruin and decay in the operational quality of the HE sectors. The study concludes with the need for the prioritization of Nigeria's HE sectors where the conditions and environment of work will be improved to dissuade the out-migration of Nigerian academics. The study also concludes on the roles and responsibilities of Nigeria's university administrators to increase efforts in ensuring that academics are provided with the best capacity development initiatives for global competition.

Constituting appropriate empowerment and sustainable livelihood initiatives for academics through the Federal Ministry of Education will contribute to uplifting many Nigerian academics from the shackles of economic deprivation with a commitment to the development of Nigeria's HE sectors. The study emphasizes the need for proper integration programs and sense of belonging for migrant academics in countries of migration. With the scarcity of research in the migration literature on migrant academics lived experiences and sustainable livelihood discourse, the present study contributes to extant literature in understanding the routes of academic migration and sustainable livelihood expositions, particularly from the Nigerian context.

Limitations and future research

The focus on a single nationality of migrant academics could also restrict the understanding of migrants' academics lived experiences and sustainable livelihoods from other nationals with similar economic and HE peculiarities in Africa. Future studies can interrogate this through a quantitative method where the research problem can be thoroughly described and generalized to a wider spectrum of population.

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