



THE RISING PREFERENCE FOR FOREIGN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AMONG NIGERIANS: What a Study Reveals

POLICY BRIEF

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Source: <https://nairametrics.com/2022/10/06/nigerians-spend-11-6-billion-on-foreign-education-in-3-years/>

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Nigerians' quest for foreign university education is rising, with the UK, the United States, and Canada registering as top destinations (ITA, 2023). For instance, in the 2017/18 and 2021/22 academic sessions, the number of Nigerian students in the UK alone grew from 10,685 to 44,195, a 314% increase, the second-highest after India's 517% (ICEF Monitor, 2024). This trend impacts positively on the economy of the UK, but for Nigeria, which hardly attracts foreign students, this exerts tremendous pressure on its scarce foreign exchange. This policy brief draws attention to the drivers of the outward drift and how to address it.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigeria has 96,702 students studying abroad according to World Bank figures, and the figure keeps increasing with the UK, US, Canada, and Australia as the key choices for Nigerian students (ICEF Monitor, 2024). In the US alone, according to the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), the number of Nigerian students at US universities grew by 22.2% to 17,640 in the 2022/23 academic year from 14,438 in the previous year. The CBN problematised this scenario by indicating that between 2010 and 2020, foreign education expenses amounted to \$28.65 billion, which surpassed the \$16.65 billion required for Nigeria's annual imports in dollar payments in 1980 (CBN, 2024). In 2021/2022, Nigerian students contributed an estimated £1.9bn to the UK economy alone (SBM Intelligence, 2024). This represents a huge drain on the country's scarce foreign exchange with far-reaching consequences on the macroeconomic environment. Statistical and stakeholder interview data drawn from a NISER study are used to examine the critical issues involved and how to enhance the attractiveness of Nigerian universities.

Findings indicate that the increasing quest for foreign university education is driven by perceptions of superior education standards and better opportunities and choices in foreign universities. Specifically, the results show that 92% of respondents are motivated by the high education standards abroad, and 93.5% believe that foreign universities offer better practical skills than Nigerian universities. Furthermore, Nigeria's weak and unstable economy, coupled with policy inconsistencies and insecurity, are reported significant drivers of the outward drift as expressed by 100% of the respondents.

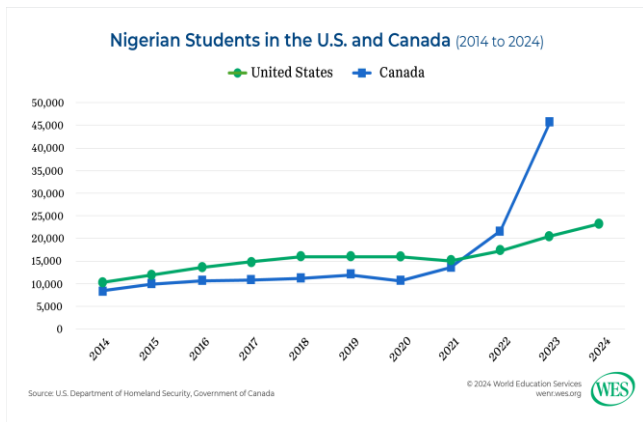
Key Recommendations:

- ✓ The government should reform Nigerian university programmes to compare favourably with standards and skills obtained in foreign universities.
- ✓ The government should build a strong inclusive economy that should enhance the standard of living of youth during and after the completion of studies.

1.1 Background

University education is pivotal for economic development globally. In Nigeria, its primary objectives include instilling values, developing intellectual capacities, and appreciating environmental dynamics. However, a significant number of Nigerian students seek education abroad due to perceived deficiencies in the local system. Despite having the highest number of higher education institutions in Africa, millions of Nigerian youths are unable to secure admission at home. This has made Nigeria a prime target for foreign student recruiters, with countries like the US, UK, Canada, and others attracting large numbers of Nigerian students.

Nigerian universities struggle to retain students, who increasingly seek education abroad due to perceived higher standards, better opportunities, and less frustration. This trend, driven by economic instability and policy inconsistency in Nigeria, results in brain drain and capital flights that hinder national development.



Source: <https://wesr.wes.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/0924-WENR-SSA-Student-Mobility-Trends-Graphic-B-V1.png>

2.0 FINDINGS

2.1 Motivations for Foreign Universities

This brief reveals that the high standards of foreign universities and their global rankings are major attractions for Nigerian students. 92% of respondents desire foreign education due to these high standards, and 93.5% believe it offers better skills. Economic instability and policy inconsistency in Nigeria are significant *factors*

driving this trend, with 100% of respondents citing the poor economy and 89.5% highlighting policy inconsistency. Political instability also plays a role, as noted by 90% of respondents.



Source: <https://ischoolconnect.com/blog/international-student-scholarships/>

The availability of scholarships abroad further motivates students, with 94.5% willing to study overseas due to scholarship opportunities.

2.2 Economic Burden of Foreign Education

The quest for foreign education has huge economic implications for Nigeria. Among other things, according to the CBN, the growing number of Nigerian students studying abroad has led to the depreciation of the naira against the dollar.



Source: <https://businessday.ng/opinion/article/why-exchange-rate-liberalisation-is-bad-for-rescuing-and-defending-the-naira/>

The CBN disclosed that, over the past decade, foreign exchange demand for education and healthcare alone totalled nearly \$40 billion, surpassing the total current foreign exchange reserves of the CBN (CBN, 2024).

2.3 Policy Options

Enhance Educational Standards: The federal and subnational governments should reorganise Nigerian universities to match the educational standards of foreign institutions.

Develop Quality Programmes: University authorities should design programmes to equip students with skills comparable to those offered by foreign universities.

Improve Economic Stability: The government should build robust economic activities to improve students' living standards and create job opportunities.

Expand Scholarship Opportunities: Partnerships with industry leaders should be encouraged to expand scholarships for intelligent, indigent, and exceptional students.

Ensure Policy Consistency: The Federal Government should institute a strong policy framework to ensure uninterrupted implementation of development plans irrespective of government changes.

- **Economic Activities:** Enhance economic stability to improve students' living standards and attract international students.
- **Scholarships:** Expand scholarship opportunities through industry partnerships.
- **Policy Legislation:** Implement strong policy frameworks for uninterrupted development plans.

2.3 Conclusion

Nigeria is a significant market for foreign student recruiters due to the large number of students seeking education abroad. This trend, driven by economic instability and perceived educational deficiencies, can only be reversed by making Nigerian universities more attractive. This requires enhancing educational standards, ensuring economic stability, and maintaining consistent policies. Implementing the following recommendations will help retain students within the country, contributing to national development and reducing the brain drain.

3.1 Recommendations

- **Standardise Education:** Align Nigerian university standards with those of foreign institutions to retain students.
- **Quality Education Programmes:** Design programmes that provide skills equivalent to those acquired abroad.

Further Reading

Ogunode, Akinjobi and Abubakar, (2022). A Review of Factors Responsible for Admission Crisis in Nigerian Higher Education and Way Forward. Available online:
<https://mjssh.academicjournal.io/index.php/mjssh>

UNESCO (2020) Report. Nigerian students studying abroad. Available online:
<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/nigerian-migrants-pursuing-dream-any-cost-0>



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This Policy Brief draws from a NISER Study on Enhancing the Attractiveness of Nigerian Universities