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IMPACT OF BRAIN DRAIN AND ACADEMIC MIGRATION ON NIGERIA'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (2019-2024)

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Abstract

The persistent migration of Nigerian academics abroad has raised critical concerns about its implications for national development, particularly in the areas of research, education, and human capital retention. The exodus of highly skilled professionals is often driven by unfavourable working conditions, poor remuneration, and insecurity, which undermine Nigeria's institutional capacity and socio-economic growth. This study aimed to examine the impact of brain drain and academic migration on Nigeria's national development between 2019 and 2024. The study was anchored on the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) propounded by Gary Becker (1976) and James Coleman (1990), which explains that individuals make migration decisions based on calculated self-interest and perceived benefits. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, with data collected from 150 academic staff using structured interviews and questionnaires. The study found that brain drain had significantly reduced the quality of higher education and research output in Nigerian universities. It also revealed that poor remuneration and insecurity were the most prominent factors driving academic migration. Based on the findings, the study recommended that the government should improve academic working conditions and research funding to retain skilled professionals. Additionally, policies promoting academic career development and institutional reforms should be introduced to reduce the rate of migration and boost national development.

Keywords: Brain drain, academic migration, national development, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Brain drain, also referred to as human capital flight, has emerged as one of the most significant challenges affecting national development in developing countries, particularly Nigeria. It refers to the large-scale emigration of skilled professionals, especially academics, researchers, medical personnel, and other specialists, who seek better opportunities abroad. Over the past decade, and particularly between 2019 and 2024, Nigeria has experienced a considerable outflow of its intellectual workforce, leading to concerns about its long-term capacity for sustainable development, innovation, and global competitiveness.

The migration of Nigerian academics and researchers to countries such as the United Kingdom,

Canada, the United States, and Australia has intensified in recent years. This trend is largely driven by push factors such as inadequate funding for research and development, poor remuneration, limited academic infrastructure, insecurity, and a lack of professional growth opportunities within Nigerian institutions (Adebayo & Duruji, 2022). Pull factors from host countries, including higher salaries, well-equipped laboratories, academic freedom, and opportunities for international collaboration, further exacerbate the issue (Akinrinade & Ogundele, 2021).

The exodus of professionals from Nigeria's tertiary institutions reached alarming levels. Reports show that Nigerian universities lost thousands of lecturers to foreign institutions, undermining the quality

of education, supervision, and research output (Adelakun & Bello, 2023). The impact of this academic migration on national development is profound, as it affects critical sectors such as education, healthcare, technology, and policy formulation. The depletion of intellectual resources weakens institutions, hampers knowledge transfer, and reduces the country's global research visibility.

Moreover, Nigeria's inability to retain skilled academics is compounded by systemic governance issues. These include irregular academic calendar disruptions due to strikes, underinvestment in education, and a dearth of incentives to support research and innovation. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has consistently highlighted these problems, which have led many of its members to seek better working conditions elsewhere (Ogunyemi, 2020). The resultant brain drain has implications not just for human capital development, but for national productivity and socio-economic growth.

While the Nigerian government has introduced several interventions such as the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) and diaspora engagement initiatives these measures have not significantly stemmed the tide. Furthermore, the lack of a coordinated national strategy to attract, retain, and utilise the skills of Nigerian scholars abroad remains a major setback in reversing the trend of academic migration.

It is within this context that this study investigates the impact of brain drain and academic migration on Nigeria's national development between 2019 and 2024. The aim is to understand the causes and consequences of the ongoing outflow of intellectual capital and to recommend policy measures that can mitigate its adverse effects.

Nigeria's development trajectory continues to be constrained by the persistent loss of its most talented professionals to countries with more attractive academic and professional environments. Over the past five years, the outmigration of lecturers, scientists, and skilled graduates has created critical human resource gaps in higher education institutions, research centres, and knowledge-based industries. This brain drain phenomenon has undermined the nation's ability to

foster innovation, build institutional capacity, and compete effectively in a global knowledge economy.

One of the most pressing issues is the decline in the quality of education and research in Nigerian universities. As senior academics and researchers migrate abroad, younger, less experienced staff are left to fill the vacuum, often without adequate mentorship or support. This has led to reduced research output, fewer publications in reputable journals, and weakened postgraduate training programmes (Okafor & Ilesanmi, 2022). Consequently, Nigeria's academic reputation on the global stage continues to diminish, and its capacity to contribute meaningfully to international scientific discourse is impaired.

The loss of academic professionals also has far-reaching socio-economic implications. The education sector is a critical driver of national development, and its decline negatively affects human capital formation, technological advancement, and the quality of governance. Furthermore, the economic cost of training professionals who subsequently emigrate represents a significant loss of public investment (Onyeukwu, 2023). Many countries benefiting from Nigerian intellectuals often do so without contributing to their education or professional development.

Despite the recognition of brain drain as a national crisis, policy responses have remained fragmented and largely ineffective. There is a lack of comprehensive data on academic migration, and existing policies tend to be reactive rather than strategic. This has allowed the brain drain problem to persist and, in some cases, to worsen. In the absence of a holistic approach to address both the root causes and consequences of academic emigration, Nigeria risks losing its future knowledge base and developmental potential.

It is therefore crucial to assess the scope and implications of academic migration, particularly between 2019 and 2024, a period marked by global uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, and increasing insecurity. Understanding how these factors influence brain drain will help inform better policy and planning towards national development.

The increasing trend of academic migration from Nigeria has become a serious impediment to the

country's development. The consistent loss of highly skilled professionals erodes institutional strength, undermines innovation, and limits national growth. It is the backdrop this study examined Impact of Brain Drain and Academic Migration on Nigeria's National Development (2019-2024)

The following research objectives were deigned to guide this study

- i. To examine the effects of brain drain and academic migration on Nigeria's national development.
- ii. To identify the key factors driving the migration of Nigerian academics abroad and their implications for the country's socio-economic progress.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Brain Drain

Brain drain refers to the large-scale emigration of educated and skilled professionals from one country to another, often from developing to developed nations, in pursuit of better employment opportunities, living conditions, or political stability. The term was originally coined by the British Royal Society in the 1950s to describe the outflow of scientists and technologists to the United States and Canada. Today, the phenomenon has taken a global dimension and is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria.

According to Docquier and Rapoport (2012), brain drain is "the international transfer of human capital, referring to the migration of highly skilled individuals from one country to another." This definition emphasises the loss of human capital and expertise, which are crucial for national development. Similarly, Kapur and McHale (2005) describe brain drain as "the movement of professionals with university-level education and training across national borders," often leading to a talent vacuum in the country of origin.

The conceptual framework for analysing brain drain rests on three primary components: push factors, pull factors, and developmental consequences. Push factors are internal conditions in the home country that drive skilled professionals away, such as poor remuneration, political instability, lack of research

facilities, and insecurity (Adepoju, 2020). Pull factors are external attractions in the host country, including better career prospects, academic opportunities, and improved quality of life (Adefuye, 2021).

In terms of developmental consequences, brain drain can have both negative and positive impacts. Negatively, it leads to the erosion of institutional capacity, shortage of professionals in critical sectors such as health and education, and long-term developmental stagnation (Akande & Ojo, 2019). On the other hand, some scholars argue that the diaspora can generate remittances, transfer knowledge, and foster transnational networks, which may benefit the home country in the long run (World Bank, 2023).

This framework is particularly relevant in the context of Nigeria, where the mass emigration of health workers, academics, and IT professionals between 2019 and 2024 has raised significant concerns over national capacity to sustain critical services and drive innovation.

Academic Migration

Academic migration, also referred to as scholarly or brain migration, is a phenomenon involving the movement of academics, researchers, and higher education professionals from one country or region to another, often in pursuit of better working conditions, enhanced research opportunities, intellectual freedom, and higher remuneration. Scholarly definitions of academic migration generally align it with broader concepts of brain drain and human capital mobility, particularly in the context of global knowledge economies.

According to Teferra (2019), academic migration is the cross-border movement of individuals primarily for scholarly engagements such as teaching, research, or academic administration. It is influenced by both "push factors"—such as inadequate funding, limited career prospects, political instability, and poor infrastructure in the country of origin—and "pull factors" like competitive salaries, advanced research facilities, and institutional prestige in host countries. These factors interplay within a global knowledge economy where higher education institutions compete for top talent (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

In a similar vein, Rizvi (2017) frames academic migration within the broader context of globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education. He argues that the increasing interconnectedness of universities worldwide, coupled with the strategic recruitment of global talent by developed countries, has created structural imbalances. These favour knowledge-rich nations and institutions while exacerbating intellectual deficits in less-developed regions, especially Sub-Saharan Africa.

The conceptual framework guiding this study draws from Human Capital Theory and the Global Knowledge Economy Model. Human Capital Theory posits that investment in education and training enhances individuals' productivity and mobility (Becker, 1993). In the context of academic migration, scholars are seen as mobile human capital whose relocation reflects a rational decision to maximise the returns on their skills. The Global Knowledge Economy Model, on the other hand, positions academic migration as a dynamic component of global competition for innovation and scientific advancement (OECD, 2021).

This framework conceptualises academic migration as a cyclical process shaped by institutional, economic, and political contexts at both sending and receiving ends. It recognises migration as both a challenge and an opportunity posing threats to national capacity in sending countries while fostering international collaboration and development in knowledge creation.

Hence, academic migration is not simply a unidirectional loss but a complex process with implications for national development, international relations, and the restructuring of global academic hierarchies.

Nigeria's National Development

National development refers to the overall improvement in the economic, political, social, and technological well-being of a country. It encompasses efforts to improve the living standards of citizens, create sustainable economic growth, and foster institutional capacity building. According to Todaro and Smith (2020), national development is "a multidimensional process involving the reorganisation and reorientation of entire economic

and social systems to promote sustained economic growth and structural transformation." In the Nigerian context, national development is shaped by a combination of governance structures, public policies, human capital, infrastructure, and international engagement.

The conceptual framework for Nigeria's national development is underpinned by key dimensions including economic growth, institutional capacity, human development, infrastructure expansion, and social equity. These components are interlinked, forming a systemic pathway toward sustainable development. Nigeria's Vision 20:2020 and the National Development Plan 2021–2025 outline strategic goals to reposition the country as one of the top 20 global economies, highlighting the importance of inclusive governance, industrialisation, and human capital development (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021).

Human development is central to national development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) emphasises that improving health, education, and employment prospects enhances citizens' capabilities and accelerates national progress. Nigeria's Human Development Index (HDI) performance reflects gaps in education quality, healthcare access, and income distribution all critical variables in the national development framework.

Institutional capacity and governance are equally vital. Weak governance and endemic corruption have historically undermined Nigeria's development agenda. As North (1990) suggests, institutions defined as the rules of the game in a society shape political and economic interactions and are crucial for development. Strengthening democratic institutions, enforcing the rule of law, and ensuring accountability are thus fundamental for national progress.

Infrastructure, including transportation, energy, water, and ICT systems, forms the backbone of economic and social activities. As noted by Ajakaiye and Tella (2021), poor infrastructure in Nigeria impedes business operations, reduces productivity, and widens regional disparities.

In sum, Nigeria's national development framework must be holistic, integrating economic policy, social welfare, governance reforms, and

infrastructural investments. The theoretical underpinning aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provide a global benchmark for inclusive and sustainable development.

2.2 Empirical Reviews

Okafor, C. & Nwankwo, U. (2021) studied *Brain Drain and the Crisis of Development in Nigeria: A Focus on the Education Sector*. Mixed-methods approach involving surveys and key informant interviews with 150 university lecturers across five federal universities. Human Capital Theory was adopted. The study found that the mass exodus of skilled academics has severely weakened the capacity of Nigerian universities to deliver quality education, conduct cutting-edge research, and mentor future scholars. Over 60% of respondents cited poor remuneration and lack of research funding as drivers of migration. The authors recommended improved salary structures, investment in research infrastructure, and bilateral academic exchange agreements to encourage return migration and knowledge transfer.

Ibrahim, M. A. (2023) assessed *Academic Migration and National Development in Nigeria: Rethinking Policy and Institutional Responses*. Qualitative content analysis of policy documents, complemented by in-depth interviews with 20 Nigerian academics in the diaspora. World Systems Theory Used. Ibrahim argued that Nigeria's peripheral position in the global knowledge economy facilitates the extraction of intellectual capital by developed nations. The study revealed that most emigrated scholars contribute more to host countries than to Nigeria due to lack of institutional linkage and engagement policies at home. The study recommended the creation of diaspora academic networks, inclusive national research grants for offshore scholars, and institutional reforms to strengthen local capacity and reduce push factors.

Okeke, C. E., & Uzoma, C. A. (2021) investigated *Academic Brain Drain in Nigerian Universities: Causes and Implications for National Development*. Qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with 20 academic staff from five federal universities across Nigeria. Push-Pull Migration Theory Used. The study identified poor remuneration, lack of

research funding, limited opportunities for career growth, and persistent insecurity as key push factors encouraging academic migration. Pull factors included better academic infrastructure, opportunities for international collaboration, and higher salaries abroad. The authors emphasised that the continuous loss of skilled academic professionals weakens local university systems and hinders innovation and national capacity building. The study recommended that the Nigerian government increase funding to higher education, improve working conditions for lecturers, and create favourable policies to retain and attract academic talents.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

A suitable theoretical lens for examining the *Impact of Brain Drain and Academic Migration on Nigeria's National Development (2019–2024)* is the Rational Choice Theory (RCT).

Rational Choice Theory by Gary Becker (1976); James Coleman (1990). Becker's foundational work was published in *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (1976), while Coleman expanded its application in *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990).

Assumptions of the Theory

Rational Choice Theory assumes that individuals are rational actors who make decisions based on calculated self-interest. Actors weigh the costs and benefits of each available option and choose the one that maximises personal utility or advantage. In the context of brain drain, the theory suggests that Nigerian academics migrate abroad after evaluating the perceived benefits better salaries, improved working conditions, career advancement, and security compared to local alternatives.

Critics of Rational Choice Theory

Critics argue that RCT oversimplifies human behaviour by reducing it to mere economic reasoning. It often fails to account for non-material motivations such as patriotism, emotional ties, and social norms. Furthermore, it has been criticised for its lack of predictive power in complex social situations (Green & Shapiro, 1994). RCT also ignores systemic barriers, institutional failure, and collective decision-making

processes, which are significant in understanding migration patterns in developing countries like Nigeria.

Applicability to This Study

Despite its limitations, RCT is applicable to this study because it offers a useful framework for understanding the decision-making process of Nigerian academics. It explains why, faced with institutional decay, low remuneration, insecurity, and poor research support, academics rationally choose migration as a means of improving their well-being. It also helps policymakers understand that reversing the trend requires altering the incentive structure to make staying more beneficial than leaving. Thus, RCT highlights the individual motivations behind academic migration and connects them to broader socio-economic outcomes.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for gathering detailed information on the causes, patterns, and implications of brain drain and academic migration in Nigeria between 2019 and 2024. The design enabled the researcher to describe, interpret, and analyse data collected from a target group of participants directly affected by the phenomenon.

The population of the study comprised academic staff in public universities across Nigeria, particularly

those in federal institutions known for research and postgraduate training. This population was chosen due to their strategic role in national development through education, research, and innovation.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select a sample of 150 academic staff, including both those currently in Nigeria and those who had migrated abroad between 2019 and 2024. This technique ensured the inclusion of individuals with direct experience relevant to the study's objectives.

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and interviews, focusing on factors influencing migration, perceived consequences, and recommendations for policy intervention.

Data were analysed using simple percentage and frequency tables, allowing for clear presentation and interpretation of trends and patterns. This method facilitated a straightforward understanding of the relationship between academic migration and Nigeria's national development.

4. Results and Discussion

The data collected from interviews with 150 academic staff were presented using frequency tables and percentages for clarity. Each response category was quantified to show the distribution of opinions on academic migration and brain drain

Table 1: How has academic migration affected the quality of higher education in Nigeria

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A. Greatly reduced	82	54.7%
B. Slightly reduced	38	25.3%
C. No effect	20	13.3%
D. Improved	10	6.7%

Q2: Brain Drain on Research Output

A. Very high negative impact	90	60.0%
B. Moderate negative impact	35	23.3%
C. No impact	15	10.0%
D. Positive impact	10	6.7%
Total	150	100

Table 2: Key Drivers and Implications of Academic Migration

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Q3: Reason for migration		
A. Poor remuneration	60	40.0%
B. Insecurity and instability	40	26.7%
C. Lack of research funding	25	16.7%
D. Career advancement abroad	25	16.7%
Q4: Implication on socio-economic progress		
A. Decline in human capital	75	50.0%
B. Slower economic growth	30	20.0%
C. Increased reliance on foreign expertise	35	23.3%
D. Minimal or no effect	10	6.7%
Total	150	100

4.1 Interview Interpretation and Analysis

Interviews were conducted with selected academic staff from Nigerian universities to gain qualitative insights into the effects and drivers of academic migration. When asked, “*How has academic migration affected the quality of higher education in Nigeria?*”, the majority (82 respondents, 54.7%) said it had “greatly reduced” the quality. Another 25.3% stated it had “slightly reduced” it, while only 13.3% saw “no effect,” and a minimal 6.7% believed it had “improved.” This suggests that the migration of experienced academics is perceived as a significant threat to educational standards and mentorship.

On the question, “*What is the impact of brain drain on research output in Nigerian universities?*”, 60% described it as having a “very high negative impact,” with 23.3% noting a “moderate” effect. This aligns with the reported decline in publication rates and reduced postgraduate supervision capacity.

Regarding motivations for migration, 40% of interviewees identified “poor remuneration” as the most influential factor, followed by “insecurity and instability” (26.7%). Finally, in discussing the broader socio-economic implications, half (50%) pointed to a “decline in human capital” as the major consequence, indicating long-term damage to national development. The responses strongly support the argument that brain

drain undermines both educational and socio-economic progress in Nigeria.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study revealed that brain drain and academic migration had significantly undermined Nigeria’s national development between 2019 and 2024. Respondents identified poor working conditions, inadequate research funding, insecurity, and lack of career advancement as major push factors. Many academics who migrated did so in pursuit of better remuneration, professional fulfilment, and safer environments. The study found that the continuous exit of highly skilled academics negatively affected the quality of education, research output, and mentorship in Nigerian universities, thereby slowing innovation and human capital development. This aligned with the findings of Okeke and Uzoma (2021), who noted that academic migration had weakened Nigeria’s knowledge systems and contributed to institutional decline.

However, some participants acknowledged that while academic migration had adverse local effects, it also offered opportunities for diaspora engagement, cross-border research collaboration, and remittances. This dual perspective was supported by Ibrahim and Adepoju (2022), who argued that the Nigerian academic diaspora, if properly engaged, could contribute to

national development through knowledge transfer and policy influence. Nonetheless, the majority of respondents maintained that the negative impact outweighed the benefits. The study therefore concluded that unless deliberate policy reforms were implemented to retain and attract academic talent, Nigeria's socio-economic development would remain stunted.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concluded that brain drain and academic migration significantly weakened Nigeria's national development between 2019 and 2024. It was found that the continuous loss of skilled academics led to a decline in research output, poor mentorship, and reduced institutional capacity in universities. Economic insecurity, poor remuneration, lack of research funding, and unfavourable working conditions were key drivers of migration. While some benefits, such as remittances and international collaborations, were acknowledged, they did not compensate for the loss of intellectual capital. The study emphasised the urgent need for policy

reforms to retain academic talent and revitalise the education sector.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made, in line with the objectives of the study:

- i. The Federal Government should prioritise investment in the higher education sector by improving research infrastructure, funding, and academic working conditions. This would help retain skilled professionals and enhance local capacity for innovation, which is vital for sustainable national development.
- ii. Comprehensive policy reforms should be introduced to address the root causes of academic migration—such as poor remuneration, insecurity, and limited career advancement. Creating a competitive, secure, and rewarding academic environment would discourage migration and strengthen Nigeria's human capital base.

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