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Navigating Borders: Migration Pathways and Experiences of Nigerian Students in Portugal

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Master in Sociology

Supervisor:

PhD., Sofia Gaspar

Department Of Social Research Methods (ESPP)

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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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Resumo

Este artigo de pesquisa examina os padrões de migração dos estudantes nigerianos, impulsionados por conflitos acadêmicos em seu país de origem e pela acessibilidade e facilidades de visto em Portugal. A pesquisa aborda as escolhas, experiências e aspirações desses estudantes. O estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa, incluindo dez entrevistas semiestruturadas com estudantes nigerianos que migraram para Portugal, além de análise documental. Os dados foram interpretados sistematicamente por meio da análise temática. Os resultados destacam que, apesar das experiências acadêmicas positivas, a barreira linguística do português constitui o principal obstáculo estrutural, limitando significativamente a assimilação profissional. Conclui-se que Portugal tem sido utilizado como um trampolim pela maioria dos estudantes, que planejam prosseguir sua migração gradualmente dentro da União Europeia.

Palavras-chave: Migração, Estudantes Nigerianos, Portugal

Abstract

This research paper examines the migration patterns of Nigerian students, which have been driven by academic conflicts at home and by the affordability and convenient visa opportunities in Portugal. The research addresses the choices, experiences, and dreams of the Nigerian students. The study employs a qualitative research strategy, comprising ten semi-structured interviews with Nigerian students who have migrated to Portugal and a document analysis. The data were interpreted systematically using the thematic analysis. The results emphasize that, even with positive academic experiences, the Portuguese language barrier is the principal structural problem, drastically limiting occupational assimilation. It concludes that Portugal is being used as a stepping stone by most students, and that they are therefore placed to continue their migration step by step within the European Union.

Keywords: Migration, Nigerian Students, Portugal

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1.1. Introduction

Academic advancement, personal development, and socio-economic opportunities have increasingly elevated higher education to a new level of internationalization, making border-crossing evident in contemporary global mobility (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Over the years, Nigeria has emerged as one of Africa's most significant sources of international students due to domestic educational challenges and the opportunities that come with studying abroad. The destination of most Nigerian students for decades has been countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and, more recently, some European countries, including Germany (Beckett et al, 2022; Barker, 2021). The migration pattern of Nigerian students has evolved because students now choose Southern European nations such as Portugal which offer low tuition fees and efficient visa processes along with cultural similarities from their colonial past and favorable post-study immigration policies.

This evolving trend is beneficial in highlighting the complexities of Nigerian students' migration trajectories, especially those that fall beyond the conventional ones. The increasing number of Nigerian international students in Portugal is a corollary of larger processes in both the global and regional academic worlds (Staff Reporter, 2025). Historically peripheral in the competition for African students as compared to Anglophone or francophone destinations, Portugal has been attracting more attention due to its highly affordable cost of living, expanding English language offered programs, friendly visa conditions, political stability and reputation for cultural openness and safety (Campos, 2022). As such, these emerging factors have made Portugal a candidate destination within the global education market, with the Nigerian student in mind, who often desires educational mobility due to structural deficiencies at home, and Nigeria's larger view of academic mobility (Ploner & Nada, 2020).

Furthermore, Portugal's growing popularity as a destination for Nigerian students is situated within broader changes in Europe's educational and migratory networks (Iseolorunkanmi et al, 2021). With tightened immigration and work regulations for international students in traditional destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, other countries in the European Union are stepping up to meet the demand. Particularly in Portugal, there have been efforts to market universities abroad, provide scholarships, and simplify the integration of foreign students (Zakaria & Alhassan, 2019). This further helps foster a receptive approach by African students, as the country's historical ties with Africa mainly belong to the Lusophone culture. However, student migration to a primarily Portuguese Lusophone country is occurring with an increasing flow of Anglophone sub-Saharan students who bring forth their own linguistic, cultural and academic dimensions to the student migration experience (Hunter & Boswell, 2015).

The migration of Nigerian students to Portugal is shaped by complex transnational networks rather than a simple cause-and-effect relationship (Ploner & Nada, 2020). All these can be family expectations, peer recommendations, alumni networks, social media narratives, and educational agents' activities, shaping how people perceive Portugal as a study destination. By directing student movement, informal networks fill the gap between institutional promotion and personal decision-making. This indicates that institutional decisions do not solely determine the migration of Nigerian students but is a socially ingrained process influenced by shared aspirations and the lived experiences—such as narratives of academic achievement, challenges with integration, and methods for overcoming legal or financial obstacles—of prior migrants (Ploner & Nada, 2020).

Although Portugal has become a relevant destination for African student mobility, the experiences and trajectories of Nigerian students in this context have been scarcely studied (Ploner & Nada, 2020; Fonseca et al., 2015; Nada & Araujo, 2018). There is some literature on

African migration to Southern Europe, but this is mostly on irregular, labour, or larger diasporic communities (Krannich & Hunger, 2022). Despite the growing visibility of academic migration from West Africa to Southern Europe, our understanding of this phenomenon remains limited compared to other migration research. A lack of awareness makes Nigerian students' choices in education, cultural engagement, and aspirations—both related to and independent of the host country—uncertain and unstable

The movement of Nigerian international students to Portugal is a significant issue in global student mobility. This illustrates the transformation of academic aspirations, the interplay between national educational difficulties and international opportunities, and the complex transnational realities that young Africans face. Consequently, this study fosters scholars in understanding contemporary educational migration trends and the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional contexts influencing international students from the Global South. The migration of Nigerian students to Portugal signifies shifting destination preferences. It reflects the aspirations of a generation that, with tenacity and adaptation, refuses to accept a predetermined role in an evolving world.

Student migration is becoming increasingly important in higher education, particularly for young people from low-income countries seeking better academic opportunities, international exposure, and socio-economic advancement (Kowalewska et al., 2019). With its large population and educational challenges, Nigeria has been one of Africa's leading suppliers of overseas students for years (Iseolorunkanmi et al., 2021; Ploner & Nada, 2020; Oyebamiji & Adekoye, 2019). Indeed, scholars have traditionally discussed migration as the flow of poor countries to wealthy ones in migration corridors. However, many countries are migrating to developing countries like Nigeria, and the recent migration to Portugal has received little analysis (Oyebamiji & Adekoye,

2019). As Nigerian students increasingly choose Portugal as a study destination, it is necessary to examine their motivations. Ajetumobi (2024) examined the push and pull factors that influence students who wish to travel and study abroad due to dissatisfaction with Nigeria's educational system and Portugal's appeal. However, much of the literature on international student migration tends to focus on major global student flows, often overlooking the specific patterns of student movement between individual countries.

Nigerian students, predominantly Anglophone, have advantages and disadvantages in Portugal due to its cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences (Veiga et al., 2007). Ebbing that engagement reveals how Nigerian students negotiate their educational and social lives in Portugal and how it affects their identities, objectives, and futures. It does not show how Nigerian students access Portuguese institutions, the transnational networks and players they use to relocate, or how their expectations match their realities. Without this understanding, Nigerian and Portuguese higher education institutions may struggle to develop policies and support systems that meet the needs and goals of this growing student group (Ploner & Nada, 2020).

This study fills the academic vacuum on Nigerian overseas students in Portugal. Thus, analyzing the migration decisions and arrival of people necessitate examining the complex socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and personal factors.

The research aim of this dissertation is to explore the migration trajectories of Nigerian international students to Portugal, focusing on the decisions, experiences and their aspirations.

The research questions to address this aim are:

1. What are the main push and pull factors that influence the migration of Nigerian students to Portugal for higher education?

2. How do social networks, information channels shape the decision-making process of Nigerian students choosing Portugal as a study destination?
3. What academic, cultural, and social experiences do Nigerian students encounter while studying in Portugal?
4. What are the post-study aspirations of Nigerian students in Portugal, and how do they envision their future in terms of migration or settlement?

This study is structured into five chapters, each presenting distinct content and characteristics. The first chapter is the general introduction where the study is being presented. Chapter two reviews related literature with a focus on relevant studies in international student mobility and topics that benefit the understanding of this study. The third chapter explores the research methodology, identifying the pattern by which the researcher carries out the investigation. The fourth chapter analyses the data gathered during the research. In contrast, the fifth chapter, which is the last chapter, concludes the research and opens up for possible future research on the same research framework, identifying the current research gaps.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Perspectives on Student Migration

Migration Transition Theories enable a critical analysis of migration processes to reveal patterns that contradict policy narratives (Weber & Van Mol, 2023). Migration Transition Theories describe how migration patterns and causes transition because of a country's social and economic development. They show how migration differs from one society to the next as it transitions from pre-industrial to post-industrial. This is because the nature, direction, and volume of migration change (Skeldon, 1990). Many policy discourses believe development will end emigration, but transition theories argue that economic, social, and political development often increases emigration rates until a certain point (De Haas et al., 2020). Migration transition theories propose an inverted U-shaped relationship between development and emigration. Early development fosters outward migration when countries prosper economically and invest in infrastructure. After some development, emigration rates may level off and even decrease as the country becomes more attractive to migrants (Van Mol et al., 2023). This theoretical framework helps explain how general it is in understanding human movement patterns like international student migration.

De Haas (2020) Carling (2002), and Carling and Schewel (2018) have detailed the mechanics of this inverted U curve. These scholars proposed the capabilities and aspirations paradigm to connect macro-level migratory trends to micro-level individual decisions. Individual capability depends on resources, finances, education, social networks, and information. As development

continues, more people and households gain these skills, reducing migratory barriers. Increased income, education, communication technologies, and transportation infrastructure make international migration more appealing (De Haas et al., 2020). Any migration is expensive and risky. Thus, elites or wealthy social groups have traditionally done it. World development has democratised migration and movement at many scales.

On the other hand, aspirations stem from people's views of opportunity in the destination and home nations. Because life opportunity attractiveness varies by place, personal desires and society expectations are linked (De Haas et al., 2020). People may become more aware of overseas lifestyle, educational, and professional prospects due to increased information flows, foreign mass media, or exposure to foreign cultures as a country develops. Thus, progress may initially encourage migration. Over time, improved domestic prospects and reduced gaps between home and destination nations may reduce migratory desires and emigration (Lipura & Collins, 2020).

Although designed to explain general migration patterns, the capabilities-aspirations paradigm helps explain international student mobility. Crevani and Shimwana (2017) cited Van Mol (2014) that overseas students migrate like labour or retirement. Both cases include strategic decisions about personal development and life improvement. Student migration, like other transitory or cyclical migrations worldwide, involves studying abroad with the possibility of returning. ISM fit into the migration transit concept since students had similar expectations, capabilities, aspirations, and situations and landed like other migrants.

In international student migration, macro-, meso-, and micro-level influences matter. Macro factors include national development, political stability, and educational infrastructure, while

meso factors include social networks, diaspora communities, and university recruitment (Mulvey, 2021; Tan & Hugo, 2017; Xu, 2023). Individual motivations, educational objectives, financial capacity, and personal experiences of prospective students are micro variables. Van Mol et al. (2023) found that international student mobility patterns are closely linked to large-scale migration trends and that as development levels rise in Global South countries like Nigeria, students' aspirations and abilities to study abroad will rise. More student migration is expected as development indicators grow, but only until a certain point when overseas education is no longer essential or desired.

Compared to push–pull models in international student migration literature, migration transition theories have many benefits. Push–pull models explain migration decisions as a logical balance of push and pull factors (unemployment, conflicts, limited educational possibilities, strong career prospects, quality of education, stability, etc.). These models have been criticised for being simplistic and static, ignoring the fluidity of human ambitions and surrounding conditions (Lipura & Collins, 2020). Migration transition theories allow migration decisions to vary due to economic, social, and political developments in both countries. They also emphasise that increased abilities and global awareness of opportunities drive migration.

Migration transition theories can also help explain international student mobility destination country characteristics. Global university rankings and host nation GDP are crucial when choosing a country. If higher education interest rises in those countries, overseas students are drawn to the wealthy countries' top colleges. Dyadic country characteristics like language sharing, colonial ties, historical links, also shape migration flows (Jagganath & Singh, 2021; Mulvey, 2021; Mulvey & Mason, 2022). Since Malta, Portugal, and other EU countries have shared colonial histories, linguistic similarity, especially between Nigerian students from

Portuguese-speaking regions, and diaspora communities that reduce migration's psychological and social cost, Nigerian students may find them more appealing.

However, studying how host nations and dyadic traits connect to the development of countries of origin can help scholars understand international student migration. As their countries improve economically and socially, lower-middle-income students like those in Nigeria can afford and want to study abroad, according to their talents and aspirations. As domestic higher education institutions become more competitive and possibilities expand, outward student mobility rates may fall. Thus, migration transition theories provide a dynamic and time-sensitive framework for analyzing how growth trajectories in countries like Nigeria affect international students' migration decisions to Portugal.

2.2. Understanding Immigrants Experience

Amongst recent scholarly efforts into international student migration, there has been a developing concentration on migration perspectives from the Global South and diverse motivations and patterns of global student mobility. By examining the flow of students in terms of migration, Börjesson (2017) identifies three broad logics (market, proximity and colonial) that structure the movement of students across borders, arguing that such migratory choices for going abroad are always based on both structural as well historical reasons. This understanding is further explained by Baas (2019) and Perkins and Neumayer (2014), who emphasize that it is income differentials, common languages, and the existence of the colonial legacies that matter in determining where students would like to go.

For most foreign students, migrating to a new country and environment is a complex process. Some are worried about having problematic language and/or acculturation issues, visa insecurity, or discrimination (Sykes & Ni Chaoimh, 2012). Moreover, as soon as they enter a new environment and its consequent strangeness, it presents multiple challenges for foreign students. As Gill (2007) suggests, foreign students are ‘often confronted directly with ‘strangeness’ in the host country’. Also, many foreign students feel isolated and lonely (Sakurai et al., 2010). This has been portrayed by Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) who summarized that these children face complex challenges such as ‘culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to the unfamiliar social norms, like eating habits, customs and values, the difference in the systems of education, loneliness and isolation, homesickness, and loss of the existing social networks’.

Moreover, Gu (2005) also recognizes the ‘learning shock’ in host universities when confronted with an unfamiliar educational culture. As such, there is evidence in the previous research, which identifies that the despair experienced by all the higher education students can be very superbly upsetting to the foreign students (Carroll & Ryan, 2007), as they have to labor with ‘extra stressors of language anxiety second and changing to some new instructive surroundings’ (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

MurphyLejeune has also noted that ‘newcomers have to face ‘practical demands of all sorts’, all of which are pressing on them’ (2003: 105). Additionally, Gresham and Clayton (2011) point out that in the initial stages of their study abroad, foreign students are confronted by different immediate requirements, which involve adapting to a new academic environment, a new setting and a new country. Hence, social support networks are key to helping foreign students adapt through interaction, friendship, cultural modeling, and dialogue (Gill, 2007). A substantial amount of research has demonstrated that social support is strongly correlated with the success of

foreign students' adaptation (Yeh & Wang, 2000; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Thomas & Sumathi, 2016; Mao & Liu, 2016). The ability of foreign students to adapt to a new country is considered a significant aspect, including the foreign language (Yang et al., 2006; Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014).

One of the fundamental aspects of the successful training of trainees in the receiving country is their knowledge of the language of training (Kosheleva et al., 2015, p. 40). In an academic sense, students with no knowledge of the language of study cannot penetrate the content of the classes either in verbal or in written form and subsequently affect the students' grades and their feeling of achievement. According to Cammish (1997), language is a prime problem. Language proficiency directly affects students' sociocultural and psychological adjustment as suggested by Zhang and Goodson (2011).

Zhang and Brunton (2007) stated that language matters at education and society levels. Language has an impact beyond academic context because low levels of language proficiency can interfere with students' interactions with the local population (Masgoret, 2006). Language also has implications for students' academic, social, and identity at a profound level. As Alred (2003) explained, language is the essence of identity formation. As mentioned above, most research on the foreign student experience takes place in English-speaking countries, which is a big gap in the knowledge of student migration in other countries. Such countries have an exciting case, since they 'have always favoured the migration of students from former colonies' (Beine et al., 2014). Concerning this knowledge gap, it deals explicitly with the issue of language and how it hampers the understanding of the possible effect colonial background as a country can have on the integration of former colony students. Despite these findings, research on foreign student

experience cannot focus solely on challenges and hurdles for foreign students (Baker & Hawkins, 2006).

This would create a continuous reproduction of the 'deficit view' (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009), which has become quite common to the extent that researchers who study the experiences of foreign students would rather choose this image. Furthermore, most research literature suggests that the student experience can be positive or negative as the constructs are polarised (Leask & Carroll, 2011). The experiences of international students are more complex and require a lens that does not reflect existing narrow binaries and describes international experiences in either positive or negative terms (Nada et al., 2018).

2.3. Push and Pull Factors for Nigerian Students' Migration to Portugal

The understanding of why Nigerian students migrate to Portugal, is explained through push and pull factors as they explain the reasons for migration. Maringe and Carter (2007) defined push factors as factors in the home country that drive people away, and pull factors refer to factors in the destination country that attract migrants.

Several push factors have led to an increase in the number of students migrating abroad in Nigeria. A significant driver is the petrification of the quality of education. Universities are overcrowded, the academic staff strike often, higher education institutions are underfunded, and the curricula are old (Oyekanmi, 2021). Adeyeye (2020) states that due to the instability in

Nigeria's educational system, numerous students have turned to other places where degrees are more stable and globally acknowledged. Socio-political instability, economic insecurity, and high unemployment rate also compel students to seek greener pastures in other countries (Kazeem, 2019). Besides, the challenges of insecurity, which include insurgencies and regional unrest have further increased students' desires to search for safer academic environments to learn (Oyekanmi, 2021).

Although the USA, Canada, and the UK are considered elite destinations, China, Ukraine, and Malaysia are reached as stepping stones to reach the destination because these countries are cheaper as well as easier to enter initially (Minaeva & Prostakov, 2022; Carling, 2020). Nevertheless, Portugal's position on the ranking scale is not defined clearly. The effects of relatively low tuition fees in Portugal, student-friendly policies, and chances of obtaining residence permits after graduation are still under-researched in terms of the extent to which Nigerian students see Portugal as their final destination or a point where they stay until they are able to migrate from. The increasing number of Nigerian university students in Portugal necessitates a better understanding of Portugal's role within the broader context of educational and aspirational migration, to determine whether Portugal is used as a preferred location to settle or as a layover.

Moreover, the relevant emerging literature has identified other strategic choices of international students, including affordability, migration costs, and long-term settlement possibilities (Mulvey, 2021; Sadri & Chaichian, 2018). Alternatively, more relaxed immigration policies and relatively lower living costs rendered countries in the semi-periphery like Turkey and Malaysia increasingly attractive for students from countries with low and middle income (Findlay et al.,

2012; Wen & Hu, 2019). Such a development provides a useful lens for considering Portugal's positioning.

On the contrary, it is a country that, over time, has become increasingly favored as a destination due to certain pull factors. Nigerian students are drawn to Portugal by its low cost of living and the affordability of education compared to other Western countries (Amara & Jemmali, 2018). Portuguese universities have many programs in English, most of which are presented at postgraduate levels, which eliminates the language barriers that, before, discouraged African Anglophone students (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Besides, Portugal has become an attractive country for international students looking for longer opportunities, as the OECD (2024) further proved, due to their proactive immigration policies, for example, the student visa pathways which allow easier residency application after graduation.

Cultural factors also come into play. Having strong historical roots to Africa through colonial history, particularly Lusophone Africa, have led to a wider cultural attitude towards African students (Knudsen & Andersen, 2019). According to comparative migration studies (Pires et al., 2010), Nigerian students often perceive Portugal as a society with less racial hostility than in other European societies. In addition, Portugal's strategic geographical location serves as a gateway to other opportunities in broader Europe (European Migration Network, 2023), and students can travel freely within the Schengen area once they have completed their studies.

In this sense, it is without a doubt that the Portuguese government's investment in the internationalization of higher education has been aimed directly at non-Europeans, with students from Africa being the primary target (Delanty, 2018; Marschall, 2018). For instance, programs including 'Study & Research in Portugal' (SRP) enable international students to avail of

scholarships and support services to migrate from countries such as Nigeria (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, 2022). As such, Nigerian students contribute to the Portuguese economy in form of academic contributions and future skilled workers, where these initiatives also respond to Portugal's demographic need to counteract its declining youth population.

The migration of Nigerian students to Portugal is driven by a combination of strong push factors, such as educational system failures and socio-economic instability at home, and attractive pull factors, including affordable education, favorable educational policies, and extensive European mobility opportunities in Portugal. Therefore, studying these dynamics is crucial for policymakers and educational institutions seeking to develop effective international student support and retention strategies. Therefore, whereas the point of analysis does touch on the difficulties imposed on foreign students in Portugal, this paper also looks at how students deal with and confront such difficulties.

These frameworks provide useful insights but are mostly generalized and do not consider specific pathways of Nigerian international students, especially to emerging destinations such as Portugal. Although Portugal's growing popularity as a study destination seems underexplored compared to the typical UK or USA destinations, the effect of Portuguese linguistic and cultural ties to part of Africa, as well as the fact that Portugal is becoming cheaper to study in and easier to get a visa permits application to there is becoming apparent. However, the fact that most research on student flows between Nigeria and Portugal has not been focused has created a gap in the literature on how Portugal is situated in student's stepwise or transitory migration strategies.

While there has been a proliferation of literature that focuses on the transnational migration strategies of Global South students (Mulvey, 2021; Tan Hugo, 2017), the current body of literature that generalizes African students' experiences tends to collapse these many countries together without taking cognizance of the specificities of Nigerian national context. Additionally, there have been few direct assessments of how insecurity, unemployment, and decline of higher education quality in Nigeria affect Nigerian students' choice of study abroad destinations, least of all in unlikely countries like Portugal.

As Portugal is becoming increasingly attractive for migration, there remains a lack of empirical and qualitative data on the migration aspirations, adaptation experiences, and plans of Nigerian students. Consequently, this review points to a gap in the literature because there is a dire need for country-specific, student-focused, and trajectory-oriented research to explain the complex motivations, pathways, and outcomes relating to Nigerian students' migration to Portugal. Filling this gap would lead to a more nuanced view of educational migration and can feed back into student mobility, integration, and post-study migration policy tools in Portugal.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

This chapter discusses how this is accomplished and examines the approach taken to investigate the migration trajectory of Nigerian students in Portugal.

3.1. Methodology

Due to the nature of the research objectives, the chosen methodology was based on qualitative methods. For cases involving numerous complex, subjective, and context-bound phenomena, such as the exploration of international student migration in this dissertation, qualitative research is the best option (Snyder, 2019). This aligns with Creswell (2014, p.4), who affirms that qualitative research is used for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. As such, the study will take a qualitative approach to interpret meanings, experiences, and perceptions as narrated by the students themselves to capture the depth and complexity of their migration journeys (Yilmaz, 2013).

The techniques employed are semi-structured interviews as a primary tool for data collection because they enable the researcher to follow different leads while covering all the required areas. This is because Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) explain that the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life; it is part of life itself, and its human embeddedness is inescapable. From this, themes will be identified and serve as the basis of an interview guide, including push and pull factors, motivations, application processes, migration histories, cultural and academic adaptation, challenges, and plans.

Interviews were conducted in English to ensure clarity and mutual comprehension. With the participants' consent, interviews were audio recorded for approximately 45–60 minutes. Due to logistical constraints, interviews were conducted either in person or via video conferencing platforms, including Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

Alongside interviews, document analysis furnish contextual and policy-oriented insights that corroborate and substantiate the primary data. Essential documents—such as university entrance policies, scholarship programs, migration regulations, and reports from governmental and international organizations—will elucidate the institutional and structural aspects affecting student mobility. This triangulation augments the depth and credibility of the research outcomes (Kawulich, 2005). This is because triangulation helps with comparing and combining different perspectives of migration perspective. This helps to explore migration from different angles to get a clearer and more accurate picture.

The research employs an inductive approach, aligning with the interpretivist philosophy and qualitative methodology (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). It allows one to let patterns, themes and theories emerge from the data. Naturally, this is particularly useful in understudied contexts, such

as the case of Nigerian students migrating to Portugal, for which little empirical data are available. Rather than validating a pre-existing theoretical model, one is supposed to ground the insights by real-life stories and experiences (Tracy, 2014).

3.2. Research Strategy and Sampling

The research strategy consists of purposefully selecting currently enrolled Nigerian international students at higher education institutions in Portugal, or those who have just graduated from such institutions in Portugal. The reason for purposeful sample technique is that in purposive sampling, according to Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000) “researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample based on their judgement of their typicality. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs”. With purposive sampling, participants should have firsthand knowledge and experience in answering the research questions (Creswell, 2014). The criteria to be used in the selection will consist of age, sex, field of study, type of institution (public or private), period of stay in Portugal, and migration pathway (direct or stepwise).

This sample consists of 10 people, which is typically adequate to attain thematic saturation—the stage in qualitative research when no new themes or insights arise from further data (Cohen Manion, & Morrison, 2000). Other participants may also be reached through snowball sampling. This strategy is beneficial for accessing networks of international students, who may be difficult to identify through institutional records.

A multiple case study approach will be employed to secure depth and variation in perspective. It involves choosing participants within Portugal with a major focus on the University of Lisbon,

Lisbon in institutional contexts will give comparative insights into other academic and social environments, thus enriching and robusting the findings.

Ten Nigerian students in Portugal were interviewed. They included six males and four females, and were aged 22–35. They studied Nursing, Engineering, Business and IT in universities in Lisbon, Porto, Coimbra and Braga. Most were postgraduate students, and they had all lived in Portugal for a period of one to five years. A particular consideration was that some were working (part-time in hospitality, technology or caregiving roles) while others were exclusively focused on their studies. The student group displayed broad regional and cultural representation from Nigeria and enabled comprehensive insights into student motivations and academic and social integration within the Portuguese context.

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data as it is an appropriate method for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Robson, 2011). Thematic analysis is systematic, inductive, and flexible, providing themes inductively derived from the participants' narratives. The study comprises 10 interviews, utilising NVivo to systematically organise, code, and discern patterns within the qualitative data, thereby augmenting analytical rigour and efficiency.

Six key steps would be followed in the analysis

- i. Repetition of reading transcripts to familiarize data.
- ii. Initial codes are generated through NVivo software.

- iii. The coded data was searched for themes.
- iv. Reviewing and refining emerging themes.
- v. Defining and naming themes.
- vi. Producing the final narrative report.

Themes are expected to deal with significant issues such as affordability of tuition fee, institutional support, aspirational desires after migration, integration into the new culture, and stepwise migration strategies. Colonial legacies, language affinity, and perceived proximity to Europe will be given particular attention to how they inform students' migratory logic (Rasinger, 2008). This is because the identified themes are relevant for the course of the current research.

Thematic Analysis of the Interviews

Theme	Codes	Excerpts (with elaboration)
Decision		
1. Affordability & Accessibility	Affordable tuition; low living cost; easier visa compared to UK/Canada	<i>Adeola</i> said, "Portugal's tuition was within my parents' budget; in the UK it would have been impossible." <i>Tosin</i> emphasized that an MBA here is "half the cost of the UK or US," which gave him the freedom to invest in side projects. <i>Fatima</i> compared it with Canada and explained, "Scholarship competition there was tough, but Portugal gave me a chance without so much financial strain." <i>Bolaji</i> added that affordable rent and transport in Lisbon allowed him to balance studies with part-time IT work.
2. Push Factors from Nigeria	Academic instability (Academic Staff Union of Universities strikes); poor research facilities; insecurity; unemployment	<i>Adeola</i> mentioned, "The constant ASUU strikes wasted my time in Nigeria." <i>Chinedu</i> stressed, "Doing a PhD in Nigeria would have been frustrating because laboratories are underfunded." <i>Fatima</i> admitted insecurity in northern Nigeria

		worried her parents. <i>Ngozi</i> lamented, “After graduating in Nigeria, I stayed jobless for 18 months; it was choking.” These conditions collectively pushed them to seek a stable academic and professional environment abroad.
Experience		
3. Language & Integration Challenges	Portuguese as barrier; difficulty networking; compulsory language for jobs	<i>Fatima</i> explained, “In hospitals, many patients speak only Portuguese, so I struggle.” <i>Chinedu</i> echoed, “Networking outside campus is hard without the language.” <i>Ngozi</i> tried classes but still found casual conversations difficult. <i>Sola</i> noted, “Urban universities support international students better, but outside Lisbon or Porto, locals expect Portuguese.” Thus, language emerged as the biggest non-academic challenge across interviews.
4. Academic Experience in Portugal	Practical, interactive teaching; research orientation; workload challenges	<i>Adeola</i> admired Portugal’s demand for independent study: “Professors want you to think, not just repeat notes.” <i>Amaka</i> enjoyed diverse classrooms: “Learning alongside people from Asia and Europe opened my mind.” <i>Fatima</i> valued nursing simulation labs: “They let us practice real-life scenarios safely.” <i>Bolaji</i> praised “well-equipped IT labs with updated software.” Yet, <i>Chinedu</i> found the workload “intense and at times isolating,” showing that adjustment isn’t uniform.
5. Social & Cultural Adjustment	Safety and calmness; discrimination; cultural distance; limited friendships with locals	<i>Adeola</i> shared a positive: “For the first time, I can walk at night without fear.” <i>Fatima</i> , however, recalled, “A shopkeeper refused to attend to me because of my hijab—it was painful.” <i>Amaka</i> said, “Portuguese classmates are polite but not quick to form deep friendships,” highlighting social distance. <i>Tunde</i> countered with, “Joining a local football

		club helped me connect.” Overall, experiences ranged from welcoming to exclusionary.
Aspirations		
6. Opportunities & Limitations	Portugal as stepping stone; limited jobs in English-speaking roles; growing tech/startup sector	<i>Amaka</i> summarized: “Portugal is great for education but limited for jobs unless you learn Portuguese.” <i>Fatima</i> agreed: “Nursing has openings, but fluency is required.” <i>Tosin</i> saw opportunity: “Lisbon’s startup scene is buzzing—if you’re entrepreneurial, doors open.” <i>Tunde</i> noted: “Compared to Germany, salaries here are low.” <i>Ngozi</i> concluded, “It’s a steppingstone, not the final destination for most Nigerians.”
7. Career Aspirations & Future Plans	Working in EU; entrepreneurship; returning to Nigeria later	<i>Ibrahim</i> stated, “I hope to move into EU public policy work; Portugal is my gateway.” <i>Tosin</i> dreams of “building a consultancy in Lisbon’s startup ecosystem.” <i>Amaka</i> eyes Belgium or Switzerland for broader career prospects. <i>Chinedu</i> wants to return: “Nigeria needs researchers.” <i>Ngozi</i> hopes to reform healthcare back home, while <i>Tunde</i> wants to remain in Portugal short-term, then move to Germany. Plans reflect both ambition and strategic migration.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

This research is on ethical integrity. During this data collection stage, ISCTE ethics committee will pursue ethical approval. Participants will be given a detailed information sheet and informed consent form to inform them about the study's objectives, the use of collected data, the right to confidentiality and anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence.

Data has been collected and transcripts will be made from audio recordings and anonymized to remove personal information. The data was reported using pseudonyms to maintain the participants' privacy. The research will be following the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the institutional ethical guidelines on dealing with data of human subjects.

Since the participants are international students who might be afraid of institutional repercussions, special consideration will be given to the power dynamics between the researcher and the participants. Consequently, the researcher seeks to mitigate this by highlighting voluntary participation and creating a safe and nonjudgmental interview environment.

4. Findings

This section explores the dominant thematic properties that has been prevalent in the responses of the 10 Nigerian students in Portugal. The section explores each theme that has be dominant in the interviews and with scholarly deductions and attitude towards them.

DECISIONS TO MOVE

4.1. Affordability and Accessibility as a Primary Pull Factor

A dominant theme based on the responses of the respondents is that affordability and accessibility are the main factors that make the Nigerian students to prefer Portugal. Adeola and other students like him expressed tuition in Portugal was within the reach of their parents, a major contrast of the perceived impossibility of pursuing education in the UK. Tosin pointed on the fact that an MBA in Portugal is half the price of the UK or US, which gives him the financial independence to do side projects. Fatima said that in Portugal she had an opportunity without as much financial stress as in Canada with the stiff scholarship contest. Bolaji also emphasised why

he found it attractive in Lisbon, where rent and transport costs were low enough to enable him to combine part-time IT jobs with studies. Scholarship competition there was tough, but Portugal gave me a chance without so much financial strain.” Bolaji added that affordable rent and transport in Lisbon allowed him to balance studies with part-time IT work.

This finding is closely connected with wider patterns in the migration of international students, especially students of the Global South. Such semiperipheral countries as Malaysia, China, Ukraine, and Turkey have also become popular destinations, specifically because they are cheaper than high-quality student destination locations in the Global North (Findlay et al., 2012; Garvik and Valenta, 2024; Hladchenko, 2023; Mulvey, 2021; Wen and Hu, 2019). In fact, previous evidence has noted that migration cost which includes tuition and living cost is a critical determinant of students migratory choices (Garvik and Valenta, 2024).

Additionally, Portuguese institutions, though since 2014, allowed to raise their fee charged to international students as a strategic revenue-generating practice, most of them nevertheless charge lower fees to students in Portuguese-speaking countries, either due to post-colonial partnerships or due to a strategic interest to attract students to a less internationally-known higher education market (Ploner & Nada, 2020; Sin et al., 2019). This economic fact usually implies that the opportunity to get a scholarship, waivers, and other funds becomes a limiting factor that influences West African students to study abroad (Bräunlich, 2022). Moreover, the less developed countries have an increased chance of sending students to high-ranking countries either through a privileged elite or through prestigious institutions offering scholarships as a talent-drawing factor (Weber and Van Mol, 2023).

Portugal's main pull factor was relative affordability. Participants consistently mentioned how tuition fees and living expenses were much cheaper compared to Anglo-American destinations. This not only provides direct financial incentive but also enables access to higher education without overly depending on scholarships. This affordability attracts middle-class Nigerian families and reflects the broader trend where semi-peripheral states gain appeal to students from Global South countries through a combination of lower costs and reasonable academic quality.

4.3.2. Push Factors from Nigeria: A Catalyst for Seeking Stability

Findings of this research also identify push factors that are of Nigerian origin that force students to pursue education in other countries. These are rampant academic unrest, lack of good research facilities, widespread insecurity and high unemployment levels. Adeola directly attributed the unending ASUU strikes, the strike action that is usually attributed to Academic Staff Union of universities to time wastage in Nigeria, with Chinedu explaining that it was frustrating to spend time trying to do a PhD in Nigeria with underfunded laboratories. This is reflected as Adeola believes that "The constant ASUU strikes wasted my time in Nigeria." While Chinedu stressed, "Doing a PhD in Nigeria would have been frustrating because laboratories are underfunded." The parents of Fatima complained of insecurity in North Nigeria, and the 18 months of Ngozi spending her post-graduate days jobless were termed as choking. All of these factors establish a powerful desire in students to find a more secure academic and professional future in a foreign country (Bräunlich, 2022; Czaika and Weisner, 2025).

This finding is similar to the literature available on the drivers of migration in West Africa. Student mobility to France and Switzerland is caused by the low quality of the Senegalese system of higher education as well as strikes and a mismatch of curriculum with the needs of the

labor market (Bräunlich, 2022; Dago and Barussaud, 2021). Similarly, Nigeria also experiences systemic structural problems and issues with its educational system that contribute to the loss of human capital (Bräunlich, 2022; Okafor and Chimereze, 2020; Popogbe and Adeosun, 2020). High unemployment rates and graduate underemployment in West Africa force graduates to accept work lower in qualification, creating what is commonly known as the *Jakpa* (escape) feeling, especially in Nigeria (Bräunlich, 2022; Hallberg Adu, 2019; Zakaria and Alhassan, 2019).

This *Jakpa* attitude means a rebellion against unbearable conditions in home country and willingness to remigrate or to migrate further (Bräunlich, 2022). This push is also reinforced by the overall feeling that the quality of overseas higher education is better than the local alternatives (Bräunlich, 2022; Kritz, 2015). These are structural constraints within the country of origin, which include poverty, insecurity, and poor governance, which are known to be one of the leading agents in migration ambitions (Czaika and Weisner, 2025). Additionally, migration may be also a way out of confining social living conditions, limited life opportunities, political persecution, and financial instability (Ploner & Nada, 2020).

Decisions to migrate were most directly conditioned by factors in Nigeria: the Nigerian tertiary education system, particularly perennial ASUU strikes, poor infrastructure, insecurity, and graduate unemployment. These factors combined to generate a perception of instability and frustration around educational and career prospects in Nigeria. Students want to be able to count on their academic and career trajectories, which Nigeria is currently not providing. The collective “*Jakpa*” movement is an expression of Nigerian youth frustrations and the desire to secure futures

EXPERIENCES

4.3.3. Academic Experience in Portugal

Participants mostly had positive experiences with their academics in Portugal. They appreciated interactive pedagogies and access to well-equipped facilities and a diversity of learning styles and environments. Negative experiences and adjustment issues were related to heavy workloads, cultural changes, and occasional feelings of isolation or alienation. Portugal's academic system and support networks generally provided a higher quality of education, but with a steeper adaptation process compared to Nigerian institutions.

Academic life in Portugal is marked by applied and interactive pedagogies, high research focus, yet prominent workload issues. Adeola liked the focus on self-directed learning, where professors encourage students to reason and not to memorize. Amaka liked the multicultural classes, as she could learn together with students who represented different continents and this opened her mind. To express this Amaka confessed that "Learning alongside people from Asia and Europe opened my mind." Fatima was actively recommending the nursing simulation labs that provided safe practice of real life scenarios, and Bolaji highly rated well-equipped IT labs with up-to-date software. Nonetheless, this pleasant experience is not a blanket since Chinedu perceived the workload to be heavy and sometimes lonely, meaning that it was not easy to adapt as it was recorded that Chinedu found the workload "intense and at times isolating," showing that adjustment isn't uniform.

This view of academic experience shows that the perceived quality of education is an instrumental goal of international students (Bräunlich, 2022). Marketability of the degree

obtained, and the quality of education are important to students, especially those in the Global South who want to increase their level of human capital and employment opportunities in the global labor market (Bräunlich, 2022; Van Bouwel and Veugelers, 2013). Nonetheless, a significant level of academic stress may be caused by adapting to new educational systems, technologies, and academic demands (Bräunlich, 2022; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). The pressure to work under strong and overwhelming demands is reflected in the situation of Chinedu, as international students may struggle to find the necessary resources to satisfy the high academic standards because of personal desire or inner motivation, family pressure, or financial aid conditions (Bräunlich, 2022; Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

4.3.4. Language and Integration Challenges

One of the main structural challenges was the language barrier. While there are English-taught programmes, deeper social and professional integration required proficiency in Portuguese. Students who primarily interacted with their Portuguese peers or searched for jobs reported communication barriers, difficulties in placements/internships, and a sense of social exclusion. This aligns with other research on structural and integration challenges in Portuguese higher education, and more broadly, language barriers in international education and migration.

The largest non-academic issue faced by the Nigerian students in Portugal is language, which greatly affects their integration. Fatima also had a challenge when she had to attend hospitals in which most patients communicated in only the Portuguese language, and this made communication difficult as she explained that, “In hospitals, many patients speak only Portuguese, so I struggle.” . Chinedu could hardly create a network beyond campus without speaking Portuguese expressing that “Networking outside campus is hard without the language.” ,

and Ngozi also did not find easy conversations even after taking language classes. Sola noted that in small towns, Portuguese fluency is usually expected, although the urban universities of Lisbon or Porto could offer some language and linguistics assistance.

This observation highlights a significant obstacle that directly affects the adjustment and the student experience in general: the linguistic dimension is problematic among non-Portuguese students (Nada and Araujo, 2018a). Chang, a Chinese, could barely articulate himself, whereas Brenda, an American, believed that her personality was stifled in Portuguese (Nada and Araujo, 2018a). This language challenge may result in isolation, slow adaptation, and even threaten academic achievement as seen when Laina struggled to comprehend her doctoral courses (Nada, 2018a). Although Portugal uses the language as a tool to draw students with Lusophone roots (Sin et al., 2019), it causes severe obstacles to other people (Nada and Araújo, 2018a).

This also underscores the significance of language transferability in destination choice as West African students tend to prefer those countries where English, French, or Portuguese is commonly spoken to avoid the burden of learning a new language (Bräunlich, 2022). The fact that the proportion of Nigerian students in non-English speaking European nations such as Germany or Norway is lower than in the UK or the USA, depicts this choice (Bräunlich, 2022; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). That is why the Portuguese universities should not merely provide language courses but also train academic and non-academic personnel to communicate with non-Portuguese, as well as respond to the cultural references that help a person live in a foreign nation (Nada and Araújo, 2018a; Sin et al., 2019). The international student enrollment is positively correlated with linguistic ties and shared official languages, and

this effect is more pronounced in the case of students of less developed countries, who may face more formidable obstacles (Ovchinnikova et al., 2022; Weber and Van Mol, 2023).

4.3.5. Social and Cultural Adjustment: Navigating New Environments

The interviews showed that social and cultural adaptation had been a rewarding yet difficult process for Nigerian students in Portugal. The majority of the participants valued Portugal for being a safe, quiet, and orderly country compared to the insecurity and instability in Nigeria. Adeola commented, “For the first time, I can walk at night without fear.” Bolaji described Portugal as “peaceful and structured, which helps me stay focused on my studies.”

The social support networks significantly contribute to this adaptation, offering interaction and friendship, as well as cultural modeling (Gill, 2007; Nada and Araaujo, 2018a; Yeh and Wang, 2000). International students often experience loneliness, and friendships can help address it (Lin and Kingminghae, 2014; Nada and Araaujo, 2018a; Sawir et al., 2008). The transition can be facilitated by cultural proximity, which was the case with Fatima and Chinedu, finding it difficult to connect socially with locals. Fatima described her experience: “During my nursing placement, I had communication issues with some patients, who only spoke Portuguese.” Chinedu added that “Portuguese students are nice and polite but tend not to open up to foreigners.” This limited their integration to academic contexts.

Some participants reported incidents of discrimination. Fatima expressed, “Once a shopkeeper ignored me because of my hijab. It hurt, but I didn’t want to make a fuss.” In contrast, others emphasized inclusivity. Tunde said, “I joined a football club and found local friends, which made me feel more part of the community.” Although the given excerpts do not expound on the issue of discrimination, the theme code by itself indicates it. The first few years of migration may be

overwhelming due to the necessity to adapt to a new academic setting, community, and country, in addition to dealing with the overwhelming process (Gresham & Clayton, 2011; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Nada and Araaujo, 2018a; Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

Adjusting to cultural norms, such as punctuality, informality in classrooms, and unfamiliar food was also mentioned. Ngozi elaborated, “People are more private; you have to be the one who approaches them.” Initially feeling isolated, most participants described how they created coping strategies over time, such as social networks, church groups, and international student associations.

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The participants presented Portugal as an overall welcoming and safe country, but socially reserved. Language and cultural differences were the primary factors that hampered their full integration. Nevertheless, the students demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and openness to intercultural learning, turning challenges into opportunities (Brisset et al., 2010; Bräunlich, 2022). Some students are also deterring mobility by racism in the destination country, Portugal as an overall welcoming and safe country, but socially reserved (Hallberg Adu, 2019). Language and cultural differences were the primary factors that hampered their full integration.

FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

4.3.6. Post-Study and Career Aspirations

Nigerian students have varied post-study and career expectations, which include careers in EU public policy, setting up consultancies in Lisbon, and finding additional career options in other European nations such as Belgium or Switzerland, or coming back to Nigeria and becoming researchers or healthcare reformers. These plans reflect the ambitious and strategic character of their migration paths. This confirms Ibrahim's notion that "I hope to move into EU public policy work matching with Tunde who wants to remain in Portugal short-term, then move to Germany.

These ambitions are aligned with the theory of stepwise migration or multinational migration where an early destination of study acts as a stepping stone to more preferred long-term objectives or permanent residential in other Global North countries (Bräunlich, 2022; Garvik and Valenta, 2024; Paul, 2011; Paul and Yeoh, 2020; Tan and Hugo, 2017; Valenta, 2022; Zijlstra, 2020). To many West African students, international student visa can offer a way to work and permanent residence, so they often have no interest in coming back even after graduation (Bräunlich, 2022; Garvik and Valenta, 2024; Hawthorne, 2012).

The motivation behind these complicated, stage-by-stage migrations is often the realization of social mobility and their families through larger-scale mobility projects (Bräunlich, 2022; Coe and Pauli, 2020; Garvik and Valenta, 2024; Mulvey, 2021; Mulvey and Mason, 2022; Xu, 2023). A fundamental ambivalence of student migration can be their multidimensional identity as students, workers, and family members (Bräunlich, 2022; King and Raghuram, 2012). Students may be forced to explore new educational or work opportunities in foreign countries when the opportunities to stay permanently or work in their native country are limited (Bräunlich, 2022; Caron, 2020; Garvik and Valenta, 2024).

Matching this, Ngozi concluded, “It’s a steppingstone, not the final destination for most Nigerians.” Education as a measure of either supporting or extending migration can be applied to Aiko, who applied to a Portuguese summer course to keep her visa valid (Nada et al., 2023). Students’ career aspirations and post-study plans varied. Some were already working or intended to work in Portugal (particularly in healthcare and IT). Others saw it as a steppingstone to Northern Europe or had plans to return home after their studies. This reflects stepwise migration where students are already positioning themselves for future mobility by first training in Portugal.

4.3.7. Opportunities and Limitations in Portugal

The stories of the Nigerian students repeatedly drive at Portugal like every other international countries that holds promises of education opportunities but also with restrictions, especially in employment. Amaka encapsulated this view and said, Portugal is good in schooling and poor in work unless you learn Portuguese. This is expressed as she said “Portugal is great for education but limited for jobs unless you learn Portuguese.” Conforming with Amaka, Fatima confirmed that nursing was accepting but demanded Portuguese fluency. The entrepreneur Tosin was attracted by the buzzing startup scene in Lisbon. Nevertheless, Tunde reported that the pay was not that high according to Germany, and Ngozi concluded that Portugal is not the place where most of the Nigerians are going to spend the rest of their lives.

This indicates that Portugal is a less competitive economy with lower expenditure on higher education and research than Northern European nations (Sin et al., 2019). It acts as a gateway to Europe, but seldom as a final destination of people wishing to earn more or get a wider range of career opportunities. This limited number of English-speaking job positions strengthens the urgent necessity of acquiring the Portuguese language as the only means of long-term career

integration (Bräunlich, 2022). This is particularly sensitive to the difference between cheaper “semiperipheral” destinations and pricier, higher-quality countries (e.g., USA, UK, Canada, Germany) (Garvik and Valenta, 2024; Valenta, 2022). Portugal is frequently used as the former, which is a logical option when students do not have immediate access to the latter (Bräunlich, 2022). It is indicative of the so-called improvement migration, a category that fits the West African students especially well, when they strategically seek the STEM major, which they obtain typically with the help of scholarships, to gain better opportunities and improve their chances, often with the eventual goal of obtaining permanent residence in a high-tier country (Bräunlich, 2022; King and Raghuram, 2012). Several students experience unfulfilled functional aspirations because of such causes as COVID-19, poor policies, and low wages, becoming distressed because of them (Bräunlich, 2022). This leads to the effect of involuntary immobility, as people want to migrate but are forced by constrained resources or opportunities (Czaika and Weisner, 2025; Schewel, 2020).

Students clearly valued Portugal for its higher education, but many were ambivalent about or rejected it as a long-term career destination. Wages were low, English-speaking jobs and better economic prospects were seen as limited. These reflect structural barriers that reduce its attractiveness as a final migration destination. Portugal, therefore, acts as a semi-peripheral gateway rather than a desirable endpoint.

Chapter Five:

Conclusion

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the study on the migration trajectories of Nigerian international students to Portugal. The research was grounded in ten in-depth interviews with Nigerian students across various academic disciplines and levels of study in Portugal. Their experiences, situated within broader scholarly literature on international student migration, reveal both structural and personal motivations, as well as constraints shaping their mobility.

The chapter provides a synthesis of findings from the thematic analysis, outlines policy implications for Nigeria, Portugal, and international higher education more broadly, and highlights potential avenues for further research. In doing so, it situates Nigerian students' educational migration within the wider discourse on South–North and South–South student mobility, as well as stepwise migration strategies.

Portugal's main pull factor was relative affordability. Participants consistently mentioned how tuition fees and living expenses were much cheaper compared to Anglo-American destinations.

This not only provides direct financial incentive but also enables access to higher education without overly depending on scholarships. This affordability attracts middle-class Nigerian families and reflects the broader trend where semi-peripheral states gain appeal to students from Global South countries through a combination of lower costs and reasonable academic quality.

Recommendations to Nigerian policymakers

Nigerian policymakers should aim to offer a more stable higher education landscape by resolving the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strikes with a commitment to labour reforms, staff welfare, and improved university governance, to allow more predictable academic calendars and admissions. Further, it is necessary to invest in research and learning infrastructure such as laboratories, libraries, and digital resources to increase the competitiveness of Nigerian universities and reduce the student flow caused by the quest for better facilities abroad. Graduate employment opportunities can be simultaneously improved by strengthening university–industry linkages, encouraging entrepreneurship, and enacting policies that enhance graduate employability. Finally, student welfare and security both on and off-campus should be improved to enhance the appeal of local higher education, as safety and welfare concerns are key push factors for the youth considering higher education abroad.

Recommendations to Portuguese policymakers

Portuguese policymakers and universities could take measures to increase the number of programmes taught in English, especially in subjects with a higher demand by Nigerian students, which would increase the global competitiveness of Portuguese HEIs and lower barriers to entry for Nigerian students. The strong support for Portuguese learning should be expanded and woven into students' daily academic and social life in Portugal, including during professional

placements, where support from bilingual staff could ease the transition. Labour market integration should be further supported by creating transparent and effective channels for the recognition of international qualifications, increasing English-speaking job opportunities, and clearly communicating post-study visa options for skilled graduates to help retain them. Moreover, subtle discrimination must be actively tackled by Portuguese universities through regular cultural sensitivity training for staff and students, clear anti-discrimination policies, and targeted intercultural events that can build bridges between local and international students. The recent increase in the cost of living, particularly in Lisbon and Porto, also needs to be addressed, and the creation of subsidized student accommodation in collaboration with municipalities and the private sector would help students significantly reduce their expenses.

Recommendations to International Higher Education Stakeholders

International higher education stakeholders could further foster South–South collaboration by promoting joint research, faculty exchange, and curriculum co-development between Nigerian and Portuguese universities, to reduce the traditional focus on the Anglo-American world. Another key recommendation is the expansion of bilateral scholarship programmes that specifically target Nigerian students. Portuguese government scholarships, as well as those co-funded through the Erasmus+ programme, can be expanded in the context of the Portuguese–Nigerian bilateral agreements, to attract more Nigerian students, with a special focus on sectors such as STEM and healthcare where human capital transfer is especially needed. Finally, diaspora engagement could be leveraged more strategically to ease Nigerian students’ transition to life and work in Portugal by drawing on the presence of Nigerian alumni and professionals in Portugal as mentors, cultural mediators, and career links.

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