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Global aspirations and local limitations: Employment experience of Nigerian international students in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Nigeria is the UK's third largest market for higher education, but there is limited empirical research on Nigerian international students' employment experiences. Drawing on the concepts of neo-racism and agency, this research explores how 25 Nigerian international students exercise their agency to pursue or refrain from seeking employment during their postgraduate taught studies in the United Kingdom. Their lived experiences of systemic barriers are analysed, including visa restrictions, lack of support from university careers services, difficulties in securing career-oriented work and racial prejudice in job applications. Most of the research participants were in a precarious vulnerable position when it comes to employability prospects in the United Kingdom, but they demonstrated resilience and exhibited agency by way of creating opportunities within constraints and building stronger identities and skills for future employment. Recommendations are proposed concerning how national policy and institutional practice could better support Nigerian international students to improve their career prospects.

KEYWORDS

agency, careers support, employment, Nigerian international students, UK

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper explored Nigerian international students' employment experiences during their postgraduate taught studies in the UK.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The research findings reveal that Nigerian international students navigated systemic barriers during their job seeking in the UK, from visa restrictions and weak institutional support to racial bias and hiring obstacles. Despite their precarious employment prospects, Nigerian international students demonstrated strong agency and resilience to build professional skills and identities for future employment.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian international students make up one of the largest international student communities in the United Kingdom and their numbers rose from 33,985 in 2022 to 58,680 in 2023 (Universities UK, 2024). However, only nine published studies since 2010 have examined Nigerian students' experiences in the United Kingdom, looking at their adjustment to teaching and learning in their new settings (Ajibade & Hayes, 2022), lack of computer literacy and English language literacy (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2017; Eze, 2014), culture shock (Ajibade & Hayes, 2022), financial challenges (Achinewhu-Nworgu et al., 2015; Alloh et al., 2018; Nsiah, 2017), poor wellbeing (Alloh et al., 2018; Nsiah, 2017), and experiences of discrimination and othering by university staff and students (Raji, 2019; Zewolde, 2021).

Nigerian international students' employment experiences in the United Kingdom have not been the focus of empirical research, although employment is touched on by Achinewhu-Nworgu et al. (2015) in relation to the implications of UK immigration rules for non-EU students, and by Zewolde (2021) concerning experiences of othering and racism among Black African international students in the United Kingdom. However, Nigerian students' expectations of better career prospects are the main driver for them to pursue studies abroad (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). This paper therefore explores how Nigerian international students seek employment during their postgraduate taught studies in the United Kingdom to build their career prospects. It foregrounds how they exercise agency in navigating employment experiences from the lens of Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) theorisation of agency. Within this frame, agency is understood as a process in which actors draw on their past experiences, present circumstances and future projects to make purposeful choices given the circumstances they are presented with. Specifically, this paper's examination is guided by two key research questions:

1. What are Nigerian international students' experiences of seeking employment during their postgraduate taught studies in the United Kingdom?
2. How do Nigerian international students enact agency to deal with the challenges they face?

An important premise of this interrogation is that the dynamics of employability are situated within the context of neo-racism, understood here as not only discrimination based on race but

also encompasses cultural dimensions (Lee & Rice, 2007). Such a context creates a distinct social and institutional background against which Nigerian international students' agentic responses are constructed. Experiences of neo-racism are therefore assumed to be part of the social background and the conditions that inform how they exercise their agency.

POLICY ENVIRONMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Graduate employment outcomes are a national policy priority in the United Kingdom. It is a key part of the government's drive towards a more outcomes-focused approach to regulation of higher education, and it contributes to universities' performance in league tables and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (Römgens et al., 2020). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) began to gather data in the early 1990s on what graduates do after university, using the National Student Survey and the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey which asked questions about graduates' roles, salaries and industries 6 months after they finish their studies (Hewitt, 2020). In 2016, HESA introduced the Graduate Outcomes survey conducted around 15 months after each cohort has graduated (Hewitt, 2020). The Office for Students (OfS), the new regulator in England, was established by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. It scrutinises the results of the Graduate Outcomes survey and runs the national TEF to encourage higher education institutions to improve standards and deliver excellence in teaching, learning and student outcomes (OfS, 2024).

Higher education institutions are increasingly referring to graduate outcomes in their vision statements and it has become common practice for universities to seek to meet the career needs of students (Römgens et al., 2020). However, institutional strategies remain largely aimed at domestic students, and this approach is at odds with the fact that improved career opportunities are a central reason why international students choose to study in the United Kingdom (Fakunle, 2021).

There are other examples of education planning and policy in the United Kingdom failing to include international students. For example, HESA's Graduate Outcomes survey report in 2020 did not contain employment outcomes data on non-European international students, even though its dataset showed that 48% of full-time students on taught postgraduate courses were from non-EU countries (HESA, 2023). The little attention paid to international students' employment outcomes indicates discrimination towards international students at a systemic level.

CAREERS AND EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT

In response to the government's outcomes-focused approach, universities in the United Kingdom are under increased pressure to produce graduates who are work-ready (Brown, 2014). Typically, institutions use a blend of curricular and extra-curricular approaches and a range of university and community services and activities to equip students for the job market (Jackson, 2017; Pegg et al., 2012). Curricular approaches are those that are formally embedded in degree programmes; extra-curricular offerings are outside of degree requirements and not delivered via university systems and processes (Kinash et al., 2018). The most common five types of support are outlined below:

Employability skills development programmes include short courses, workshops, events and seminars, coaching and mentoring and mock assessments (Griffiths et al., 2018). *Internships and industry placements* are fruitful avenues of work experience as they boost students' chances and confidence in their job applications (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022).

Work-integrated learning brings industry and community engagement into student learning and assessment as part of degree studies (Jackson, 2017). *Volunteering and community engagement* opportunities typically involve students working on a range of community and environmental projects.

Careers services teams within UK universities are widely used to provide students with optional support in the form of career planning, advice and information (Minocha et al., 2017). However, they have attracted criticism for offering a narrow range of activities and supporting a limited number of students (Tymon, 2013). Andrews and Russell (2012) found that students have low levels of awareness of events run by careers support and it is unclear how many students engage with the resources given other demands on their time. There is a lack of individualised guidance for CV building, and career events pitched mainly at domestic students (Nachatar Singh et al., 2023).

There is also a view that the range of institutional careers provision will depend on its strategic priorities, such as achieving short-term employment outcomes, enhancing professional readiness and encouraging lifelong learning (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). Few universities in the United Kingdom offer specific careers support for their international students (Teichler, 2022). However, international students in the United Kingdom have high expectations of what their degree programmes will bring them in terms of career opportunities (Pham et al., 2019) and they place value on university-based careers activities to prepare them for the labour market (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES

HEPI's (2022) report found that only one in five international students obtained relevant paid work experience while studying. Non-EU international graduates have identified six challenges in seeking employment, including visa limitations, lack of previous work experience, limited social networks, language difficulties, cultural differences and employer discrimination (Cameron et al., 2019; Lomer, 2018; Moskal, 2017; Tran et al., 2020; Zewolde, 2021). Constraints exist on work-integrated learning, internships and placements (Fakunle, 2021; Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020) or skill-building jobs (Goodwin & Mbah, 2019). These restrictions suggest that international students are valued mainly for the revenue they bring to the United Kingdom but less so as members of the country's workforce.

There are also reports of employers' preference for domestic applicants as many perceived international applicants to be lacking familiarity with the local culture and tended to require additional mentoring and training (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020; Tran et al., 2020). Black and Nigerian international students' experience of such preferential behaviour can be particularly more acute. The notion of a model minority has put them at far more disadvantage relative to other international student groups (Ifatunji, 2016). Zywsen and Demireva (2018) refer to this as ethnic hierarchies in which Black Africans encounter more unfavourable experiences in employment compared to other minority groups such as the Chinese, who were often constructed as successful and high-performing.

Employment motivations among Nigerian international students can differ from their Chinese international peers. Although both look towards their UK degree as a ticket to enhancing employability prospects, the latter tended to regard their foreign degree as an added asset in a highly competitive Chinese labour market (Fu & Mok, 2025). For Nigerians, however, their UK education is tied to employability as the pathway for migration (Okunade & Awosusi, 2023). This is even more salient for Nigerian postgraduate international students, who were recorded to bring in the highest number of student dependents into the United Kingdom.

A postgraduate students' employment journey is also markedly different from those of undergraduates. Postgraduate international students carry with them previous relevant work training and experience that they hope to build upon or capitalise on for the next job. Employment therefore is less about securing credentials for *any* job, but is more about career expansion and transition, upskilling and professional development and identity formation (Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020). These differences in academic and work motivations, among others, shape and inform how Nigerian postgraduate international students make sense of and exercise particular decisions and actions concerning employability.

AGENCY AS AN EMBEDDED PROCESS—A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The above employment challenges suggest that non-EU international students, Nigerians included, are subjugated to particular structural barriers in the United Kingdom. This highlights an important point in the debate of employability as one that has to be taken in context. Delva et al. (2021) from a Bourdieusian lens contend that students are embedded in a structured field that determines what is legitimate in terms of employability and the kind of opportunities students as actors can make. The exercise of agency can be regarded from two perspectives, as argued by Pham (2021): weak agency in which students' choices, actions and decisions reflect the limitations that their environments impose; and strong agency referring to more proactive actions to control circumstances. This points to a critical dimension in how employability must be understood: it is not just a set of skills or competences that students acquire; instead, it is something that is also actively negotiated and shaped by the conditions that individuals inhabit. Employability in this sense is as much a process of navigating a system as it is an outcome or a product of personal development.

It is within such a framing that Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) theorisation of agency is relevant. Agency, according to the authors, can be regarded as a process of social engagement where actors' responses and actions are situated 'within a flow of time' (p. 963) as they find themselves in different contexts. Three dimensions are offered: first, the iterational component, in which individuals draw upon their past habits, routines and experiences to guide and sustain their interactions and identities in a given context (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). International students, in this case, may rely on their pre-existing work habits or norms, use former and existing networks to make employability-related actions and decisions, or capitalise on their previous training and work background and experiences in positioning themselves in the current labour market scene.

The second is the future-oriented or projective dimension that considers how the individual crafts and pursues different trajectories of action based on their innate motivations, fears or ambitions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Here, actors may hypothesise or imagine different potential patterns of action when faced with uncertainty, or undertake experiential enactment (Brotherhood, 2023). In his study of international students' experiences in their school-work transitions, Brotherhood noted how international students in the United Kingdom and Japan experimented with certain career trajectories or engaged in certain low-risk opportunities to evaluate if a particular career track or direction is viable before committing to it for the long-term in the future.

Finally, the practical-evaluative or present dimension of agency pertains to the actor's ability to make judgements in response to the demands of their current situation, entailing the careful balancing of their past habits and expectations with future possibilities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). According to Brotherhood (2023), it is at this stage, when individuals demonstrate agile and flexible responses, that they also come to better understand the conditions of their present situation. The current policy environment in the United Kingdom especially

provides a compelling space for Nigerian international students to demonstrate varied and multiple forms of present-oriented agency while also making projective decisions concerning their future.

METHODOLOGY

Research participants included 25 Nigerian international students who were pursuing or had recently completed UK postgraduate taught degrees, with seven members of the group also enrolled in doctoral programmes. Gender, age and previous working experience were considered in selecting these participants. They were recruited in four universities in England, largely from programmes that are popular among Nigerian international students: business studies, computing science, education, human resources and engineering (ICEF, 2024). About one-fourth of the research participants received scholarship or partial scholarship funding for their postgraduate studies. The gender ratio was close to 50/50: 12 females and 13 males. At the time of the interviews, their ages ranged from 22 to 45 years (Table 1).

Snowball sampling, a method widely used in qualitative research in social sciences (Parker et al., 2019), was employed in this study. Potential research participants were identified via the researchers' contacts with university staff and students, and subsequent referrals made by participants. The sample size of 25 was sufficient, as the research team observed repetition of common themes in the interviews, which is a sign of saturation, and judged that there was no need to recruit further participants for interview.

Informed consent was obtained from all the research participants. Each participant took part in a one-to-one semi-structured interview to share their employment experiences during their postgraduate taught studies. The interview schedule consisted of questions about seeking employment, challenges experienced concerning employment and how they responded to those challenges. Each interview lasted about 1 hour and was audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. NVivo software and thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. All data were anonymised by using pseudonyms for participants to protect their identities.

Given the sample size, this paper does not claim that the findings can be generalised to all Nigerian international students in the United Kingdom. It aims to address a gap in empirical literature by exploring how Nigerian international students experience employment during their postgraduate taught studies in the United Kingdom. In doing so, it uncovers actionable ways to better support their current work and future career prospects.

FINDINGS

The research participants' accounts of their experiences of employment while studying in the United Kingdom presented a mixed picture. Four out of 25 participants described their positive experiences in securing employment and using that work to develop skills and learning, and boost their CV. The rest felt vulnerable and encountered challenges in their employment journey, including issues related to visa restrictions, lack of support from the university careers service, difficulties in finding their preferred work, and racial prejudice at the job application stage and in the workplace. The first two of the themes presented here respond to the first research question of the paper and the last theme expands on the second.

TABLE 1 Summary profile of participant demographics.

Criteria	Count
Gender	
Male	13
Female	12
Degree pursued (at time of research)	
Masters	18
PhD	7
Discipline/Programmes of study	
Business	5
Computing science	3
Education	9
Human resources	3
Engineering	3
Others (law, nursing)	2
Funding (at time of research)	
Full scholarship	2
Partial scholarship (tuition only)	4
Self-funded	16
Did not indicate	3
Previous/prior experience of study/living in the United Kingdom prior to study	
Yes	10
No (i.e. first-time study experience)	14
Previous/prior work experience	
Yes	18
No prior/previous work experience/straight academic path	7
Came to United Kingdom with family/dependents	
Yes	8
No/did not indicate	17

Vulnerability in employability

Most of the research participants were in a precarious, vulnerable position when it comes to employability prospects in the United Kingdom because of limited institutional support, particular expectations and preferences of local employers and visa restrictions. These result in them being left to their own devices and settling for work not aligned with their interests and training.

Research participants were aware that their university provided employment support through extra-curricular offerings such as careers services, internships and placements and volunteering opportunities. Yet, they found the existing support generic and mainly catered for domestic students. The majority of the research participants felt they were left on their own to find employment information. For example, Participant 17 pointed out this lack of institutional support:

The support is just limited to those who have family residency or those who are not international students.... That's a big challenge for a lot of people

(international students) graduating. They don't start off at a desired job or they need more time to really look out.

(Participant 17, male, PhD in Engineering)

In Participant 17's view, these challenges served not only to limit the job opportunities for international students, but also to preclude organisations and industries from benefitting from the full spectrum of talents and skills available. Another concern, raised by a third of the research participants, is that employers only wanted full-time workers, whereas their visa rules and study commitments permitted part-time work only. This was the case for Participant 19 who was shortlisted for five jobs yet did not progress after the interview stage as the employers were looking for full-time employees, a point she felt was simply used as an excuse:

I got shortlisted for five jobs, but when it got to the stage of Zoom interview, all hearing things like 'oh sorry, we're looking for full-time staff, not part-time'. It's really frustrating, because the government allows students to work 20 hours a week.

(Participant 19, female, MA International Business Management)

Employers' disinclination to employ international students suggests discriminatory behaviour and puts international students in a vulnerable position by restricting their participation in the labour market in the United Kingdom and thus limiting their opportunities to build skills useful for future work (Cameron et al., 2019; Goodwin & Mbah, 2019).

Many of the jobs that the research participants were able to obtain were not aligned with their interests and the focus of their studies. These included: low-skilled roles in warehouses, retail, health and social care (12 participants); casual researcher and student support roles (5 participants); office work (3 participants); and supply teaching in schools (2 participants). For most of the participants, visa restrictions and study load also limited their choice to low-skilled jobs despite previous or past experience in their home country. For example, Participant 2, who had 12 years of experience in the banking industry in Nigeria, ended up working at a warehouse in order to pay his bills.

The job I've been doing here is a warehouse job. It's not what I want to do, as I have experiences in banking in Nigeria. I'm just trying to pay my bills and hoping that after graduation I can get something better.

(Participant 2, male, MA in Computer Science)

In Participant 2's account, we see not only a response or reaction to present circumstances but also how preconceived notions of life in the United Kingdom (past-oriented dimension) may have shaped the way he has come to see of his present situation and consequently, his response. His sentiment, carried in his words above, may suggest that certain expectations have not been met or that the present is different from previous expectation or original intention.

Racial prejudice in employment

Vulnerability is compounded by the racial prejudice that more than half of the research participants had experienced in the process of job applications and in the workplace. They reflected that being Black international students limited their opportunities to secure jobs that they are interested in because Black applicants were 'last on the list' for desired roles. For example, Participant 6 had been working in social care in the United Kingdom, a sector not aligned with his career aspirations, and he suspected that racial prejudice was playing a role:

When we get a master's degree, we hope to join the working system in the UK, but it is very difficult, especially when you're Black because they're going to choose people from neighbouring European countries, American, Asians, before they choose the Black. The Black is always the last on the list.

(Participant 6, male, MA Human Resources)

Likewise, Participant 16, who was working full-time after completing a master's degree, questioned whether his failure to get appointed to a new role was due to legitimate reasons or because of his race:

I had about a year of working at the bar, and then I was looking to get more shifts with a different pub. I was qualified and I performed during the interview, but they didn't even get back to me to say, 'oh, you're not successful in the role'. I'm like, 'why? ... Am I not qualified or is this some sort of race disadvantage'? That was another challenge sometimes differentiated between if you were going through either a racial discrimination or you are not just good enough based on experience or skills.

(Participant 16, MA International Business)

The research participants' concerns about racial prejudice are consistent with previous research by Achinewhu-Nworgu et al. (2015) and Zewolde (2021) which found that African international students can experience racial discrimination in finding part-time work while studying. This prejudice is not only evident during recruitment or during the application process but also in the workplace. Participant 10 who worked as supply teacher shared how insults from pupils at her school made her feel discouraged about working as a teacher in the United Kingdom:

Students can just insult you. I've been insulted before. They said F word in front of me. I was trying to encourage the student to work.... I don't want to continue as a teacher. I'm fed up, because their behaviours have been challenging for me.

(Participant 10, female, MA in Educational Studies)

For Participant 10, this lack of disrespect was not only discouraging; but also shocking, as it exposed a school culture highly different from her home country where students respect teachers just as much as they respect their parents. Here again the reconciling between the present reality and actions with past norms and values is evident.

Research participants also highlighted covert or subtle expressions of racism. These experiences were especially challenging because there was no real way of verifying whether people's motivations and intentions were racist or due merely to ignorance. For example, Participant 18 recounted an episode when she worked as a student ambassador, showing groups of parents around campus and a colleague expressed surprise that she could speak English so well:

In waiting for more people to arrive and just talking to one of my colleagues, being told that, 'oh, where are you from'? I said, 'I'm Nigerian'. The person was surprised 'oh really? You speak really good English actually'. I was like, 'why are you surprised'? ... There is a certain image that people still have and I don't feel [that] should be the case.

(Participant 18, female, MA in Law)

Such reflections support Zewolde's (2021) finding that Black African students can easily encounter racism in the United Kingdom. The Nigerian students' experience of racial prejudice, together with their limited understanding of recruitment norms and processes and employers'

expectations, can have negative impacts on their entry into work and subsequent career progression.

Resilience as agency

Despite the vulnerabilities and prejudice that the Nigerian international students in the study encountered, their actions demonstrate resilience in an uncertain and unfriendly context. These demonstrations of resilience as agency are reflected in the way they respond to challenges, how they create opportunities within constraints and how they build stronger identities and skills for future employment.

Resilience through personal growth and transformation

Research participants sought to overcome racism and other challenges they faced by adopting strategies to boost their confidence and skills. For example, Participant 16, who managed his own business in Nigeria before coming to the United Kingdom, had shifted his mindset to resist discrimination, regain confidence in his achievements and become competitive in the job market:

I overcame that (feeling disadvantaged) through renewal of my mind that I am a hundred percent good for whatever I am good at and I'm not disadvantaged, not because of my skin colour, my race, my culture. If a British person would do a training and end up in level five, I'll take it the top notch and go higher, so I'm not disadvantaged at any point. Yeah, it worked for me. ... I'm thankful that I went through those challenges because it has made me a better person.

(Participant 16, MA International Business)

This shifting of personal mindset, including projecting hope towards future endeavours, whether that is in the United Kingdom or somewhere else, is something particularly pronounced for those with previous work experience.

Agency for personal growth is also evidenced in the research participants who seized volunteering opportunities and other low-skilled, part-time jobs to improve their career prospects. This was a strategic response to their difficulty in getting formal internships and placements—routes that are recognised as very valuable for work experience (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022) but were out of reach due to visa restrictions. Five research participants engaged in volunteer positions in which they gained knowledge and skills towards their future careers. Participant 23, who was doing early childhood studies, joined a community volunteering group to get more hands-on experience and learning about supporting children:

I'm volunteering to be able to gain more access to children and be able to assist them with things and learn more about them and also about the community. These are things I'm putting together to build myself after my studies.

(Participant 23, female, MA International Childhood Studies)

As Lau (2022) observed, agency in employability is evident in how students position themselves, engage in particular activities to manage career expectations, and remain flexible in their decision-making. These actions oriented towards personal growth by expanding skillsets and gaining experience in a different context seem to align with the overall career motivation of most of the participants who viewed studying in the United Kingdom as a way to gain

credentials, a qualification or an international experience that would be useful post-study wherever they go. As Participant 17 shared, there is no need to 'limit myself in this global world' and the plan is to take the 'initial experiences from the UK' to wherever it can be applied.

Resilience through the use of social capital

A few of the research participants built their resilience by drawing upon certain social capitals, mainly the Nigerian community in the United Kingdom. According to Participant 13:

We have our own WhatsApp group. If anybody have any challenges, we go to that WhatsApp where everybody will post like, 'I'm trying to get accommodation, there's accommodation here'. I'm looking for a job part-time. Some nursing mothers are looking for where to put their child, so I can volunteer.

Research has supported how international students heavily utilise social connections particularly co-national networks as sources of support and information and to access insider knowledge and peer mentoring, among others, to navigate unfamiliar and exclusionary labour settings (Fakunle, 2023; Madge et al., 2019). Participant 13 and the others' experience confirm and support this. As agentic actors, they purposely and actively seek out and capitalise existing and available resources, such as social networks. These allow them to find job leads, be more decisive in their employment targets, or even develop emotional resilience by learning from others' experiences, as a way to deal with negative encounters.

Resilience in advocating for change

In the above narratives, the research participants' exercise of agency was inward-looking and directed at themselves, manifested in their decisions to seek out employment to develop personal skills or as a psychological response to boost self-worth. Still, for a few, agency was reflected in engagement in collective action that aims to address systemic barriers. This was the case for Participant 5, whose educational experience in the United Kingdom began since his undergraduate studies.

I used to be part of the NUS. We would try and pitch the idea that universities need to support international students a lot more. We [tried] to push the idea of the post-study work visa when it wasn't there.

(Participant 5, male, Masters student)

Collective action, through participation in organisations such as the National Union of Students, can be regarded as a form of collective agency anchored on the idea that shared power can produce results (Bandura, 2000). Collective action in this case allows actors to transcend personal limitations and instead pool together capacities to influence systemic change through a set of coordinated efforts.

This collective approach to building resilience is admittedly limited among the research participants. A few participants, while they did not indicate participation in similar collective initiatives, were vocal in their criticism of the career/employability support international students receive. Participant 15, a doctoral student who also received his postgraduate taught degree from a UK university, referenced to Nigerians' experience of studying in the United Kingdom as some form of 'middle class asylum'. This might suggest how studying in the United Kingdom is almost a privilege that only middle-class Nigerians may be able to afford,

and which can explain why many also look towards finding a job in the country after their studies. A notable observation among the few who demonstrated this third form of agency is that they have had relative familiarity with the United Kingdom (i.e. previous degrees were obtained from the United Kingdom, are not newcomers to the United Kingdom) and their education was largely self-funded. Deeply embedded career motivations, as a result of substantial investment in their education and aided by their longer exposure to British society, may facilitate such exercise of agency.

DISCUSSION

This study suggests that Nigerian international students have been disadvantaged in their employment experiences in the United Kingdom by the following key factors, including visa restrictions, employers' reluctance to recruit international students, racial prejudice and limited careers support from host universities. In response to the challenges, Nigerian students exercised their agency to navigate through their new environment and its structural barriers to secure part-time jobs that gave them opportunities for skills and personal development even though the roles were not aligned with their career aspirations. Their transformative approach counters the common deficit constructions of international students in the United Kingdom as passive and lacking in skills (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023).

The disinterest in employing international students stems from the UK immigration policy that creates systemic discrimination, thereby limiting Nigerian international students' access to employment opportunities during their studies. Although internships and placement programmes offer spaces for learning the work culture and gaining some skills, the precarity of these opportunities can make students vulnerable on the job market and reinforce the view that they are more fee-paying consumers of education than valuable talents. The lack of care for Nigerian international students' employment opportunities and career prospects likewise stands contradictory to the UK government's claim, under the banner of an international agenda, that UK higher education institutions aim to produce graduates who are prepared to live and work in a global world (Fakunle, 2021).

Research participants' sentiments and impressions that the preference is not only confined to locals but also extended to foreign or migrant applicants, Blacks are the least preferred or last to be considered, reinforce the notion of ethnic hierarchies (Zywsen & Demireva, 2018) and the prevailing context of neo-racism within which these employability issues are experienced. Hierarchies such as this reflect the existence of current structural barriers in the United Kingdom such as visa restrictions on international students and the lack of institutional and national policies and resources to support international students with their employability and career prospects. Although the sector has successfully attracted many international students to study in the United Kingdom, paying high fees to do so, it has legitimised neo-racist exclusion through certain visa restrictions and employment restrictions particularly for certain groups of international students.

Nigerian international students, however, are not without agency, as their responses to challenges evidence conscious decision-making, creativity, resourcefulness and the exercise of freedom of choice, albeit limited. The decision to take on part-time work or volunteer opportunities or to persist in a certain job to learn more skills highlights their ability to choose options based on individual needs while operating within the limits of their environment. The first two themes in our findings, while expressing employment challenges, also reveal the interconnections of the past, present and future dimensions of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The participants' narratives of vulnerability in their employment experiences disclose how closely their present actions and decisions (practical-evaluative) are tied to their past habits, motivations and previous experiences

(iterational). Actions in the present, such as dealing with disappointments and rejections, or having to settle for low-skilled work not aligned with their training, render them vulnerable because the realities of the present are at odds with the past, such as their previous impressions of working and living in the United Kingdom, prior expectations that their Nigerian work experience will be valuable in their new context, or even comparison with past contexts where getting employed was relatively easy. Likewise, the judgements that research participants make in their current circumstances not only indicate these as actions they deem to be the best courses of action in the present; but these justifications also embody and are attached to their future aspirations. This is evidenced in how they explain their current employment situation as spaces for learning new skills or their hope of getting a better job offer in the future (projective). These are particularly pronounced in the third theme that expounds on their forms of resilience as agency. Indeed, more than half of our research participants evidenced a flexible openness to their career directions, with many of them expressing the hope that their UK education can bring in international exposure and experience that they can leverage in the future, whether that is in the United Kingdom, a third country or back in Nigeria. Although only a few have expressly shared about returning home (mainly with plans to continue, pursue or open a business), few were vocal about a definite decision to stay in the United Kingdom, a point possibly the result of their experiences in the present. Many were more hopeful about taking the skills and exposure from their UK experience to another context or country, suggesting that the UK may be shifting from being a permanent career settlement destination into more a transitional stepping stone.

It is in these interlocking threads of their past-oriented and present-oriented dimensions, as well as of their present decisions with future-oriented projections that we can also further highlight the distinctiveness of postgraduate taught international students' employment experiences. Employment challenges faced by this group can be far more demotivating because they come into the United Kingdom with already substantial skills and work experience that they presume are marketable. Compared to undergraduate international students, postgraduate taught students tended to have different expectations in terms of professional employability support and greater pressure to see a return on investment (Wang et al., 2025), particularly Nigerians who invested substantially to self-fund their UK studies, as in the case of most of the research participants in our study. Decisions and actions in the present are also inevitably tied to future plans and hopes because most postgraduates have families and dependents. Employability actions in the present have to be considered in light of how they can impact future trajectories of their family. All these make their vulnerability in the UK labour scene much more pronounced as it becomes a high-stakes field for them to navigate.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) additionally noted that the interplay of these dimensions may vary across different structural contexts, meaning that as actors or individuals are positioned or encounter different contexts, certain dimensions can be more prominent. Although the students' choices and actions may be what one would regard as a weak display of agency using Pham's (2021) dichotomisation, these choices are made within the very limitations of their current context. We can argue then that the present-oriented displays of agency of the students reflect as much the limitations of the context they currently occupy. These limits in their exercise of agency in the present denote as much the failings of the context. At the same time, their projective dimension of agency, as revealed in future hopes or in the imagining of potential outcomes of their current/present actions (Brotherhood, 2023), manifests their engagement with an alternative future, whether such future is in the United Kingdom, back in their home country or somewhere else.

Finally, since agency is structured by the elements of the context, it is noteworthy to pay attention to the limited tailored careers support for international students, which tends to operate as an added systemic barrier. Employability data for international students speaks

of the quality of UK higher education to prospective applicants, so it is vital for universities to examine the employability value of their degree programmes in local and global markets, and to take measures to improve this value (Crew & Märtins, 2023).

In the United Kingdom, international students have been largely ignored in national planning and policy on graduate employment outcomes. The need for collective action, as evidenced in one of our sub-themes, confirms this. The International Education Strategy of 2019 was a good start in highlighting achievements in positive outcomes for international graduates. Yet, in the following year, the HESA Graduate Outcomes survey (2020) did not include employment outcome data on non-European international students. National policymakers should treat international students' employment outcomes as a joined-up policy priority and give teeth to the policy by embedding it in the National Student Survey, TEF and university league tables criteria.

University careers support could be improved to meet the needs of international students. Aspects of provision that need to improve include the training for careers service staff to expand their knowledge of global labour markets; taking account of cultural differences in offering students support; gaining a better understanding of the career and employment goals of international students and customising support appropriately; signposting students to employment opportunities in local and global markets; and training them to recognise where skills are transferable and to prepare for job applications and interviews. At the school or department level, universities need to ensure that degree programmes support all students to develop transferrable/generic skills alongside their discipline-specific knowledge and expertise.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored Nigerian international students' employment experiences during their postgraduate taught studies in the United Kingdom. It explored how they exercise their agency as resilience in navigating structural barriers to work, including visa restrictions, employers' disinclination to recruit international students, limited careers support from the host university, and racial prejudice in job applications and in the workplace. These barriers emerge from the relationships between national policymaking on immigration, university policy and provision and employer attitudes and behaviour.

Given the significance of international students to British universities, and more broadly the value of international education to the British economy (Universities UK, 2024), it is important to reform immigration policies to address the systemic discrimination and to build an inclusive and supportive environment for all international students' employment endeavours in the United Kingdom. Having rights to work may well prove to be a critical factor that draws more international students to UK universities. Given that career expectations are a key driver for international students choosing the United Kingdom, future national immigration policy will need to consider the expectations of international students and clarify the kinds of employment experiences they are entitled to get to help lay the foundations for their future careers.

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