

## Towards Redressing the Brain Drain Syndrome in Nigerian Universities

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**Abstract:** This article examined the brain drain syndrome in the Nigerian University system. A process whereby highly skilled and seasoned academics decide to leave the university system for overseas countries in search for greener pasture. The major causes of brain drain in the system include: poor pay package for the academics; poor funding of the university system; social unrest and conflict; poor working environment and inadequate research facilities. The consequential effect of this phenomenon were seen in the fall in standard of education; reduction in the quality of skilled manpower in the university system and the tremendous rise in the Gross Domestic Product of the receiving countries. As a way of combating the menace in the ivory tower, it was suggested that there should be adequate funding of the entire university system; conducive teaching/learning environment; upward review of the pay-package of lecturers; putting in place staff retention programmes as well as brain drain reversal initiatives. Such as the Nigerian Experts and Academics in the Diaspora Scheme (NEADS).

**Key words:** Brain drain • Syndrome • Universities

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### INTRODUCTION

The role of universities in the provision and development of manpower required for the socio-economic and technological advancement of any nation cannot be over-emphasised. As a nation's knowledge industry, universities increase the productive capacity of the labour force. In the developed countries, university scientists are able to monitor global technology trends, assess their relevance to national needs and assist in developing the national technological capacity for economic growth [1].

Up till the early eighties of the 20th Century, the Nigerian universities were repositories of everything that could be considered excellent in the academic; they had good, qualified and, to a certain extent, adequate academic staff. The working conditions were good and motivating enough [2]. During this period, the academic community in Nigeria lived to its billings: researches were conducted and results were achieved. The totality of the Nigeria university system was recognized and well respected [2].

The history of university education in Nigeria started with one at independence (University College, Ibadan, which was an affiliate of the university of London) to ninety one in 2007, with 27 federal universities, 30 state

universities and 34 private universities [3]. Nigerian university system has witnessed tremendous expansion since independence. Unfortunately, the history of the university system in the country, particularly in recent decades, indicates that there have been hindrances to the realization of the lofty expectation from the system. As it was the case in 2004, no university in Africa earned a place among the top 200 in the 2005 world ranking [4]. This posits that all is not well with Nigerian university system. The system is in travail, riddled with crises of various dimensions and magnitude. A number of multi-faceted problems have inhibited goal attainment and are raising questions, doubts and fears, all of which combine to suggest that the system is at a cross road [5].

The ugliest problem bedeviling the university education system in the recent past is the issue of brain-drain among academics. This stress put on the universities has taken a great toll on the quality of graduates produced in these institutions. Employers of labour and the general public have expressed concern on the quality of graduates of Nigerian universities [6]. This situation is glaringly evident when graduates of Nigerian universities are requested to take qualifying examinations before they can be given employment in business organizations.

This scenario seems not to augur well for a developing country like Nigeria that believes in human capital for promoting economic growth and development. It is against this backdrop that this paper examined the causes of brain-drain in Nigerian universities and the possible ways to redress the phenomenon.

**Concept of Brain Drain:** Brain drain means the mass exodus of highly trained and well experienced academics from countries with poor conditions of service to those with better work conditions in search of greener pasture [7]. Brain drain, again, is any process that leads to educational institutions losing some or a significant number of its academic staff to other sectors of the economy or to other countries [2,8]. Brain drain is a phenomenon that had afflicted the Nigerian university system most severely in the 1980s through to the 21st century. Nigeria has lost most of its experienced academics to even smaller African countries such as Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya and South Africa [9] and big countries like Britain, America, France, Germany among others [7]. Between 1988 and 1990, over 1000 lecturers left the federal universities in Nigeria [10].

For now, it is widely believed that about 10,000 Nigerian academics are employed in the United States alone [2]. Brain drain in whatever perspectives, as it is being described, is the widespread migration of academic staff from the universities in the country to overseas universities or equivalent institutions where their services are better rewarded. It must however be emphasized that while the best brains are leaving the university system, the broad aim of producing high level manpower from the system for national development may be a mirage.

**Causes of Brain Drain in Nigerian Universities:** Several factors have been attributed to the widespread migration of academic from this country (Nigeria) to other parts of the world. Some are examined below:

**Poor Pay Package to the Lecturers:** It is no understatement to say that lecturers in the nation's universities are not well remunerated compared to their counterparts in other parts of the world. Utile [7] lamented that in Nigeria a professor earns a salary of about N3.6m per annum (an equivalent of about \$31,000 USD) while his counterpart in South Africa earns R455,774 per annum (an equivalent of \$74,754.67) while translates into N9.4m Nigerian Naira. Besides, Akindutire [11] decried the situation where a young graduate who is fortunate to take up job outside the unified public service immediately

starts to earn twice his professor's annual income. The author posited that this did not augur well for staff motivation and stability of tenure in the Nigeria university system.

**Poor Funding of the University Education System:** The financial imbroglio in the nation's ivory tower and the subsequent Federal Government's refusal to accord the university its pride of place in terms of allocation of fund has over the years been generating a very unpalatable discord between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government [12]. Odekunle [13] lamented that Nigerian universities have been grossly under funded and the consequence of this financial crisis is the loss of a great deal of valuable manpower to overseas countries. The under funding of the university system has largely been as a result of the economic crisis of the mid-eighties to early nineties in the country made worse by the devaluation of the Naira as a result of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) [6]. However this under funding of the system has manifested itself in areas of deficiency in infrastructural development in the universities [13], institution deterioration [11], cancellation of a number of services among which are inadequate or epileptic supplies of stationery items and other working tools [2].

**Social Unrest and Conflicts:** Inability of government to respect agreements reached with ASUU on various issues relating to the university system in the recent past has largely been responsible for the series of strike actions in the system. ASUU has been the only vibrant union at the forefront of the 'war' with the Federal Government in the vexed issues of funding, autonomy and conditions of service. Onyeonoru *et al* [14] observed that much of the conflicts involving the government and non-academic staff unions emanate from the collective agreements reached between government and the ASUU. The incessant strikes embarked upon by the ASUU had led to frequent harassment, arrest and dismissal from work of leaders of the ASUU. Arikewuyo [9] lamented that many academics have been dismissed, retired and unjustly jailed for teaching what they were not employed to teach. According to the author, forty-nine academic staff of the University of Ilorin were dismissed for taking part in nationwide strike called by ASUU in 2001. All these conflicts have resulted to why some academics decide to find solace in a very conducive environment where there is better working conditions and career opportunities.

**Poor Working Environment:** Aside the social environment that had been said was not conducive in the ivory tower, the physical working environment seem to be very unconducive. Physical facilities are in state of despair, laboratories ill-equipped, libraries are full of empty shelves, while the few books are outdated several capital projects are abandoned and worse still, only a few of the universities can take advantage of modern information technology, for example, the electronic internet connectivity [8]. This scenario, according to the author, has led to unprecedented strike actions which rendered the university system ungovernable while many of the universities teachers have moved to other countries for better pay, thus, heightening the brain drain syndrome. Meanwhile, this condition of resource inadequacy is what Ajayi *et al.* [5] described as an offshoot of the endemic financial crisis in the sector.

**Inadequate Research Facilities:** Poor funding, quality of water, electricity and infrastructural decay in Nigeria is an added obstacle to meaningful scientific research. Devaluation of the Nigerian currency has resulted in poor research and is also responsible for the high mobility of top-flight academics [7].

**Effects of Brain Drain in Nigerian Universities:** The consequence of brain drain has manifested in a number of ways. Brain drain is a phenomenon that has seriously depleted the universities in Nigeria. Some of the effects are discussed hereunder:

**It Lowers the Standard of Education:** The mass movement of academics from the nation's universities to other countries has invariably taken its toll on the quality of outputs produced from the system. Oni [1] lamented that in this very depressing situation, the process of teaching, research, publication and knowledge development has no relevance to the challenges of the next millennium or even the present global market. A growing body of research reports indicates that the quality of training given to students in African universities falls short of the demands of the global market [15].

**It Reduces the Quality of Skilled Manpower in Nigerian Universities:** While academics leave the ivory tower for greener pasture in other sectors of the economy within the country or other countries, it presupposes that the quantity and quality of academic staff in the system will be reduced [10,6].

**It Raises the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Receiving Countries:** There would be no doubt that with the flight of seasoned academics, to overseas countries, the Gross Domestic Product of the receiving countries will be boosted [7] while the receiving countries are the winners, the releasing countries are automatically the losers.

Other effects of brain drain are; it increases the level of dependence on foreign assistance by Nigerian universities; it retards the technological advancement of the releasing country as the enlightened population that can contribute immensely to the technological upliftment of the country decides to abandon the country at the moment of greatest need.

**Ways to Redress the Issue of Brain Drain in Nigerian Universities:** Considering the biting effect of brain drain on the Nigerian university education sector, urgent attention needs to be redirected towards stopping the phenomenon. The followings are some of the ways out:

**Adequate Funding of the System:** There is the dire need for efficient funding of university system [16]. Saint *et al.* [17] lamented that the university system in the country has not had the financial wherewithal necessary to maintain educational quality even in the midst of the significant population explosion. To develop and sustain the universities require enormous amounts of financial resources. Government should therefore provide more funds to the universities. This will provide adequate resources for the maintenance of decaying infrastructure, procurement of new equipment, books, journals, chemicals and other learning inputs [1].

**Need for Conducive Teaching/Learning Environment:** Another way to redress the menace of brain drain in the university system is to improve the teaching/learning environment. Dilapidated structures, obsolete laboratory and workshop equipment and low usage of ICT have converged to make teaching of poor quality [15]. A massive overhaul of the infrastructure in the university system is therefore imperative. Apart from the physical teaching/learning environment, there is also the need to make the psycho-social environment conducive. The frequent harassment, arrest and dismissal from work of leaders of the Academic Staff Union of Universities which was in vogue under the military should stop [1]

**Upward Review of the Pay Package for Academics:** Based on the premise that the decline in the purchasing

power of lecturers' salaries was responsible for brain drain, it is hereby suggested that the personal emoluments of the lecturers need to be reviewed upwards. The wage differential between the university and other sectors of the economy is a major cause of frustration and disillusionment among present and future generation of academic staff [1]. The author reported that the pay package for a professor in Nigeria is about 1% that of his contemporary in South Africa, 7.32% (Ethiopia) and 9.15% (Ghana). This case needs to be revisited.

**Staff Retention Programmes:** Staff retention programmes can be put in place in the country, this may take the form of putting in place measures that would dissuade those still in the system from contemplating taking their flight. To do this, the struggle must encompass convincing government to allocate more fund to the system to adequately cater for the needs of the university [2]. Secondly, by providing individuals who have expertise with career opportunities and giving them the opportunity to prove their capabilities. Another staff retention programme is the promoting of existing staff who have demonstrated sufficient academic excellence to senior lecturers, readers and professors [16]. With all the staff retention programmes, staff morale would be rejuvenated and staff retention guaranteed and sustained.

**Nigerian Experts and Academics in the Diaspora Scheme (NEADS):** NEADS was launched November 25th, 2004 with the aim of attracting experts and academics of Nigerian origin in the diaspora to contribute their quota to the development of the Nigerian university system and hence to the development of the nation through short-term academic appointments. This programme is designed to encourage the return of academics of Nigerian origin in the Diaspora to come and contribute to National development through engagement in teaching, research and community services [5]. If the scheme, put up by the National Universities Commission, can be sustained, those who fled the country at the height of the economic trough and military dictatorship may eventually be lured back on a voluntary basis, just as they voluntarily went away in the first instance [2].

**Besides the above discussed points, another measure could be:** The international organizations including UNESCO, The Commonwealth, Ford, Rockefeller foundations and others could consider making their facilities and resources available to Nigerian universities [7]. They should make available research grants, academic

exchange, scholarships and donations of books and journals to Nigerian university libraries.

## CONCLUSION

Universities, all over the world, are recognized as centres of excellence, where knowledge is not only acquired but also disseminated to those who require it. The state of things in Nigerian universities seems unsatisfactory. However the concern of this paper has been the problem of brain drain, an affliction that has embroiled the Nigerian university system most severely in the mid-eighties through to the 21st Century.

It has been established in the course of this paper that brain drain is a virus that can destroy the entire university system and make the system become shadow of itself if adequate and proper attention is not given. Based on these, the entire stakeholders in the university education sector are advised to combine efforts and rise to the challenge of combating the menace in the university system. The various strategies discussed in this paper can be of immense steps to take.

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