



Discovering Possible Reasons for Delayed Graduation Time and Dropout Syndrome among Undergraduate Students in Northeast Nigeria: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Improving retention and graduation rates are now a public concern; considering the devastating implications on victims, and shrewdly on tertiary institutions, explaining the global worry and anxiety for improvement as the aberrations can erode higher education abrasively. Given that no previous literature exists on delayed time to graduation and dropout syndrome in Northeast Nigeria, it is necessary to investigate this conundrum in the light of qualitative research. In line with this, the study employed Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with 111 students, and Face-to-face interviews with 43 academic and 26 non-academic staff as respondents. Data analysis involved organising, and analysing transcripts at First and second cycle (focused) coding levels, highlighting seemingly emerging codes, cutting the codes discretely, and arranging the codes on flipcharts for group analysis sessions. Overall, six themes emerged from respondents' datasets; though narrowed to four quadrants, vis-à-vis, non-academic constraints—student individual level factors (quadrant one); and institutional constraints—symbolising non-individual constrictions (quadrant two); labour market factors (quadrant three); and last but not the least is Vision for tomorrow—future direction to solving the problem (quadrant four). The emergent themes and their categories have been presented somewhere in this study with their corresponding participant identifiers. The study recommends the need for universities to engage professional counselling practitioners to address nascent personal, social and education-inclined cases, institutions to ensure flexibility of course contents and adhere to core values and institutional norms. The study also recommends the need for summer semester examinations for students re-sitting previously failed examinations to aid time to degree completion and to assist financially unfit and vulnerable enrollees as well as keeping to best global practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there has been a considerable increase in postsecondary enrollment, yet, graduation rates have not improved accordingly as degree completion continues to be an elusive accomplishment, even in the US (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2017). Of recent, timely graduation has been a central point of discussion in higher education environment. Academics, human resource developers, institutions and policymakers have

exhibited a growing interest over the length of time to degree or time to graduation in universities (see e.g. Lin et al., 2020; Su et al., 2019). Though there has been a major public concern on the time taking by enrollees in public tertiary institutions to attain degrees, of course, for good reason and for public good. College graduates earn twice as much as high-school graduates, and six times as much as high-school dropouts; with their wealth exceptionally more than two times that of a high-school

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graduate and five times that of a high-school dropout (DesJardins et al., 2002). Ample sociological studies have examined factors that back students' dropout behaviour (see, e.g., Bosci et al., 2019; Costa et al., 2018; Doll et al., 2013). Despite this, literature is yet to examine predictors/drivers of delayed graduation and dropout conundrum amongst the enrollees who explore higher education in Northeast Nigeria, given dearth of data or suitable data for public access on this threatening predicament. Thus, this study aims to obtain data directly from students, including academic and non-academic members of the university community of this study to help accentuate how diverse factors must have helped inform students' graduation or completion times. In effect, the study aims to contribute to literature on costs of delayed graduation to enrollees who access university education and costs to society. Our research therefore breaks a new ground in literature of delayed graduation in Northeast Nigeria and by extension in Northern Nigeria due to its unique approach of investigating the phenomenon of study; using a qualitative research method with a multiple case study design.

LITERATURE

The percentage of students who drop out or graduate from universities beyond legal terms in all developed countries is very large, and deeply disquieting (see e.g., Aina, et al., 2018; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2017). There is certainly a rising number of students who enroll for higher education in different fields of study, nonetheless, a high number of them drop out brusquely—a disturbing development for employers who are bothered by the low supply of qualified workers into labour market (Behr et al., 2020). Tertiary education aims at establishing a knowledge economy to promote employability, including development of human capital. Ideally, a full-time undergraduate student ought to complete a degree in eight semesters (4 years). However, completion period of a degree programme would be conditional to nature of programme, and type of university of enrolment. Though a baccalaureate (US) is commonly referred to as a 'four-year degree' as exemplary times to degree; many undergraduates take longer than the conventional four years to complete a

bachelor's programme (Witteveen & Attewell, 2019, p. 230). Despite the surge in awareness, of school completion as guaranteeing a higher wage and opportunity for higher degrees, dropout problem is still found to be alarming in many culturally and linguistically diverse groups (Doll et al., 2013), adjunct to delayed graduation.

Dropout phenomenon and university retention have been relevant themes in many countries. In Colombia, dropout and graduation delay affect about 50% of students with a high personal-social and economic impact (Restrepo et al., 2016). In Spain, 27.5% of undergraduate students drop out of the degree they are pursuing, with 12.1% changing their degree programme (de la Cruz-Campos et al., 2023). Dropout and university retention are also issues in the US, Italy, Belgium, the UK and Brazil (Coastal et al., 2018). In the US, dropout and low completion or late departure rates in colleges and universities have drawn a significant attention. The public concern became surged, with approximately two-thirds of degree-seeking enrollees withdrawn prior to earning a bachelor's degree within six-years of initial enrollment, joined by nearly 40% of undergraduates at four-year institutions who exited from their study before earning a degree within the timeframe (Mabel & Britton, 2018).

Dropout and retention have been examined from broad perspectives, exploring their causes and consequences, including reasoning on preventive and corrective actions that may help decrease their impact (Costa et al., 2018). Though a longer time-to-degree is considered a waste of a student's time and resources—wholly on society, as it is a burden on institutions/colleges, and on taxpayers who help to sustain higher education; several happenstances can lengthen a student's time-to-degree after enrollment for a programme (Witteveen & Attewell, 2019). Whilst this position might sound logical, public understanding is at variance with reasons that kindle late departure rates or dropout by enrollees. Thus, at a time when returns to college completion are large for most enrollees with public funding for higher education limited and dwindling, targeting enrollees who are near graduation but remain at risk of dropout may call for cost-effective measures to increase degree attainment (Mabel & Britton, 2018). Besides the

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cost aspect, having a better knowledge of causative factors of dropout and understanding which enrollees are at risk of withdrawing from their programmes is important to maximising the use of resources allocated to education as it helps in developing retention strategies, as it improves graduation/departure rate by enrollees (Lassibille & Navarro Gómez, 2008).

By alleging higher education system of imperfection, investment in the sector is nothing anymore static, forecasting but potential failures (Aina et al., 2018). The discovery that only about one-half of college/university attendees/enrollees make it to graduation is perceived widely a failure—that may perhaps have developed owing to lax on the part of the enrollee, the institution, or all-inclusively, the education system. This view is particularly held sturdily by state legislatures, and reason why funding of higher education by countries is tied of late; to enrollee graduation and a few other domains. Years back, Virginia sought to tie institutional funding to graduation rates and a number of other outcomes as this equally assumed one of the institutional effectiveness measures for funding University of Minnesota for years now (DesJardins et al., 2002). Of recent there have been early warning signs in Nigeria, indicative of situations that confront higher education in some countries; more importantly, with the proposed autonomy to public universities by government, putting efficiency of higher education into challenge.

Graduation and achieving a higher education degree are consequent to successful completion of higher education; a type of human capital investment meant to increase the aptitude by the individual to be prolific to earn a higher wage (Bocsi, et al., 2019). Supporting and enhancing enrollee's success is a critical goal for higher education, with success at the most basic level defined by extent to which students persist and ultimately achieve graduation within the limit of a study period. Whereas a plethora of common factors has been identified to contribute to success by enrollee, neither the one-size-fits-all approach, nor the identification of individualised predictive factors has yielded tremendous gains in enrollee success across the board. Thus, increasing nuanced approaches to studying these phenomena are central to identifying specific ways in which predictors of

student/enrollee success operate and can be most efficiently translated into practical gains (Berzenski, 2019).

In theorising the process of college persistence, one of the prominent models often considered is the Student Integration Model developed by Tinto (1987) according to Mabel and Britton (2018). The model views retention primarily from the robustness of the social and intellectual life of a college, arrogating that enrollees end dropping out of school when not academically or socially integrated into their school community. Supplemental to this is Bean's (1980) Student Attrition Model. The model as argued further by Mabel and Britton (2018) views institutional factors as playing a smaller role in the decision to leave the school than do individual and environmental factors—in terms of whether the college experience is providing a practical value that leads/will lead to better employment outcomes.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING OF THE STUDY

This study has been guided by two distinct theories; namely: The human capital investment model [henceforth HCM] first postulated by Becker—1962 (Aina et al., 2018) and Attribution Theory [henceforth AT] by Graham (1991). The dominant approach within economics for understanding education and earnings draws profoundly from Human Capital theory. As theorized by HCM, the decision to invest in education is tied *ab initio*, to comparing the monetary benefits accruable from education, as well as the costs. Put succinctly, the individual will achieve a certain level of education (university degree as consistent with this study) if the net present value of the degree is positive at the time of enrollment by the individual. In effect, HCM was built on two suppositions: the argument that individuals consider unequivocally, the amount of monetary benefits—future monetary gains and inherent costs—monetary and non-monetary costs associated with investment in education (see e.g., Aina et al., 2018; Witteveen & Attewell, 2019). Second to this supposition, HCM upholds that prior to enrollment, enrollees are not perfectly informed about the quality of study programmes in higher institutions, their genuine interest in the contents of the courses, their abilities/skills to comply with the study

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programme requirements and the quantum of efforts required all remain unclear to enrollees.

Without any infraction to HCM, Bosci et al., (2019) following the iceberg model found six factors to be contributory to stagnation in higher education system as they also perpetuate or preserve the dropout conundrum in universities. Sequel to educational performance, which is the first in the iceberg model, it is postulated that low-academic achievement can restrain enrollees in their higher educational development, with potential to stir other unhealthy outcomes—specifically delayed graduation and dropping out from a course of study. Second in the model is enrollees' behaviour, which implies the enrollees' values. This domain monitors whether education and learning play a central role in the individual's value systems; talking of deviant behaviour elements and health-damaging behaviour. The background of the enrollee and his/her family both impact the achievement of the enrollee as a factor, given that lack of support could lead to dropping out the university. Besides, school structures, which implies resources and practices: the method of teaching—learning, the practice by academics in the institution, the peers, curricular and extracurricular activities in the institution all have influence on enrollee's motivation or otherwise. Educational system level policies are also strong determinants, as education and level policies have potential to create and maintain an appropriate institution system among others. Importantly, labour market conditions, meaning changes in the labour market would pointedly have impact on the enrollee, since effort to achieve financial independence with improved economic situation can influence an enrollee leaving school prematurely.

Besides HCM, Attribution theory (AT) further provides the platform to explain why events in the enrollee's environment happened, making possible causal attributions or

ascriptions to an event that has already transpired (Martinko & Mackey, 2019). Causal attributions answer 'why' questions, for instance: 'why did I refuse to register for the semester?' or 'why have I been absconding from lectures?' It is expected that the outcome/answer to the question describes or depicts a situation(s) of failure because the inquirer likely wants to know 'why,' given the negative or atypical—nonconforming or strange outcomes or action that emerge. Causal search hopes to impose order on a sometimes uncertain event or environment. Attributions theoretically always follow an outcome, so the sequence begins with an outcome interpreted as a success or failure. Thus, as causal attributions properties, success and failure typically are ascribed to some ability factor—which may include reference to aptitude and skills, including exertion factor—for instance, temporary or sustained effort, the difficulty (or ease) of a task, personality, mood, luck and help or hindrance from others. However, ability and effort appear to be the most dominant perceived causes of success and failure. When explaining achievement outcomes, individuals attach the most importance to their perceived competencies and volume of efforts they exerted. In essence, the initial reactions akin to something like happiness or sadness, what attribution theorists have tagged outcome-dependent emotions with individuals undertaking a causal search to determine why the outcome occurred (see Graham, 1991; 2020). As enrollee and school outcome, the individual—a graduate who delays more than the norm—the actual period earmarked for a programme will expectedly suffer lower wages as postulated by Signaling Theory, given that employers may read the delay as signifying lower skill or competence (Witteveen & Attewell, 2019). Figure 1 illustrates the interface between HCM and AT; relative to delayed graduation and dropout phenomena amongst enrollees in universities.

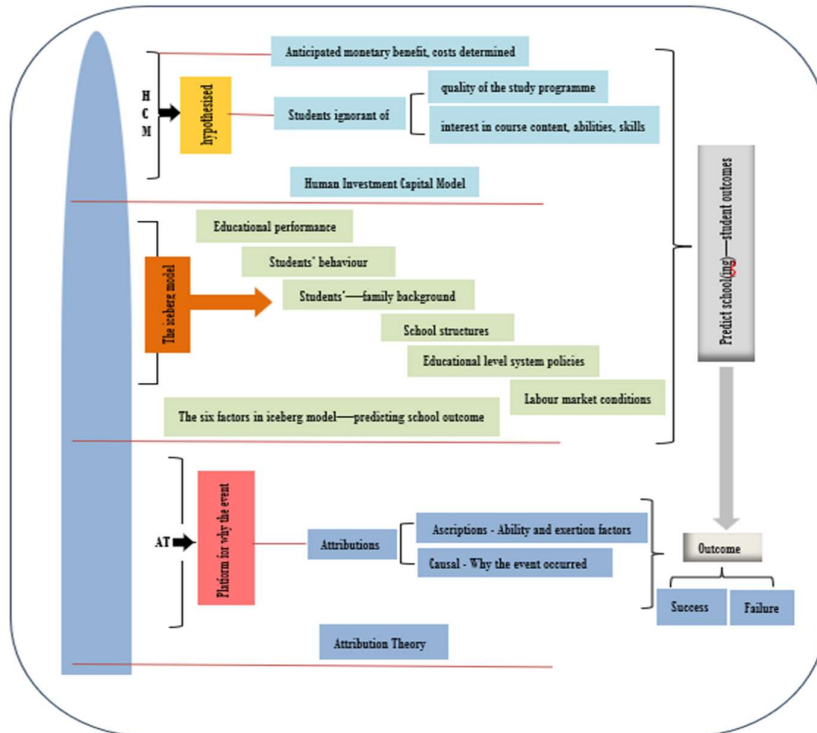


Fig. 1. Illustration Developed after Bosci et al., (2019) by Authors

THIS STUDY

There have been tremendous efforts to widen the fraction of university degree holders who participate in the globalised marketplace (Behr et al., 2020) with commitment to instill knowledge economy which supports employability and development of human capital as a large surplus of unqualified and shortage of degree holders are predicted in the years ahead (Bussu et al., 2019). Even then, literature is yet to examine dynamics that undermine late departure from programmes and factors that potentially could engender the dropping out of university by undergraduate enrollees in Northeast Nigeria, as much as examine the potential costs of these. The study by Goni and Yerima (2021) examined effects of school closures on graduating students in a few selected institutions in Yobe State given Covid-19 pandemic, using examination officers and students as samples. Proportionately, the study by Ifeoma et al., (2021) was conducted solely on Federal University Wukari Taraba State to

determine problems that impaired the steady growth of the university in terms of infrastructure and administrative mare's nest; using mixed and qualitative research methods respectively. The current study has used a multilayered set of respondents and qualitative research method to examine possible reasons leading to delayed graduation or late departure from programmes by undergraduate university enrollees in Northeast Nigeria. The research method and design were borne also out of the need to determine the risk events or factors surrounding dropping out of schools by the target enrollees—both voluntary and involuntary.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

Research Design and Justifications

We explored the phenomena surrounding graduation delay and dropout conundrum amongst undergraduate university enrollees in Northeast Nigeria using qualitative research method. The departure from erstwhile studies which employed use of quantitative research method rests on the need to co-

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construct contexts and realities that communicate the social phenomena of study via dynamic interactions with the respondents (Roger et al., 2018). We were committed to studying the different manifestations, and perspectives in which delayed graduation and dropping out of school unceremoniously could occur (Busetto et al., 2020), however, more in a socially interactive manner that mimics a situation in its 'real life' (see e.g., Huggett et al., 2018, p. 4; Novek & Wilkinson, 2019). Being guided by social-constructivism as a research paradigm/tradition, and argument that knowledge and attitudes are socially constructed (Brown, 2016) we were obsessed epistemologically to understand 'how' and 'why' the social phenomena of our study occur within a particular context, thus, strengthening the use of exploratory research to understand behaviours and attitudes that metamorphose into graduation delay in public universities in Northeast Nigeria (Mohajan, 2018, p. 2). For the purpose of generating in-depth and information rich data, it was important to collect data from different venues in multiple times (Varpio, 2017). This attempt was to enable the triangulation of respondents' data corpus within and across (Lam et al., 2016; Gustafsson, 2017) via inductive (bottom—top) approach to gain information that develop into categories and themes for the study (see e.g., Bahari, 2010; Mohajan, 2018). Addressing questions on qualitative evidence synthesis—QES (Lewis et al., 2019); the use of investigator triangulation—an opportunity for the researchers to engage in multiple observations and conclusions becomes imperative. This would help confirm the diverse perspectives by respondents as well as add breadth to the phenomenon of the study (see e.g., Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Carter, 2014; Moon, 2019).

Participants and Procedures

The study was conducted in Northeast Nigeria, with approval and funding granted by Tertiary Education Trust Fund—

TetFund Nigeria in partnership with Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University (ATBU) Bauchi—Nigeria in December 2023 (with Award No: TETFUND/DR&D/CE/UNI/BAUCHI/2022/VOL. 1, 2023). Selected via non-probability sampling technique, the sample comprised of 111 (n=64 males; 47 females) undergraduate students who were recruited across Education, Social sciences and Sciences from Federal and State-owned universities crosswise a few of the States in Northeast—Nigeria via snowball/chain referral sampling (Etikan et al., 2015; Naderifar et al., 2017). This technique ensured inclusion of victims of delayed graduation (n=60, 36 males; 24 females), enrollees who swapped their initial programmes of study for another (n=27, 15 males; 12 females) and use of potential contributors—informants (n=24, 13 males; 11 females) who were peers/associates/relations to enrollees who withdrew from their programmes per happenstances (Noy, 2008). The study also had academic staff (n=45, 30 males; 15 females) and principal non-academic staff/administrators (n=26, 16 males; 10 females) both recruited via convenience sampling; provisional to nature of their services in their universities (Stratton, 2021). Largely, inclusion of the respondents followed their volunteering to participate in the study; having secured adequate knowledge of relevance of the study to higher education with a 2-day cooling-off-period given to respondents to make suitable decisions (Balogun 2019). As statements do not come unjustified (Chaume, 2018), respondents consented to audiovisual coverage of sessions. Overall, representativeness of samples per institution was informed by year of establishment and size of institutions. However, given reason of escalating cost, galloping inflation and shortfalls in the study's budget, a few of the states in Northeast zone could not be covered presently by this study. Table 1 illustrates respondents' demographic information.

Table 1: Demographic Information on FGD and QRI Respondents

Name of Institution	No. of Respondents	Late Departure		Swapped/ Changed Programme		Withdrew According to Informants		Summary of Respondents			Mode & No. of Expected FGD & Interview		No. of FGD & Interview Accomplished	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Students	Academics	Non-academics	FGD	Inter view	FGD	Interview
		FU1	46	10	6	5	3	3	3	11	5		3	16
FU2	35	7	5	3	2	2	2	21	9	5	2	14	2	09
FU3	31	6	5	2	2	2	2	19	8	4	2	12	2	08
SOU1	25	5	4	2	2	2	1	16	5	4	2	09	2	06
SOU2	24	4	3	2	2	3	1	15	5	4	2	09	2	05
SOU3	19	4	1	1	1	1	2	10	5	4	1	09	1	06
Aggregate 11		36	24	15	12	13		111	43	26	12	69	11	44

Legend: Institutions with FU: Federal University Institutions with SOU: State Owned University

Instruments for the Study

Every research must involve a planned, ordered and public approach to come up with most suitable results. Thus, as exploratory research, this study employed the use of semi-structured—open ended interviews for its data generation (Mohajan, 2018). The use of this strategy was owing to its versatility to studying opinions, values and diverse perceptions (see e.g., Abdulsalam et al., 2023; Johnstone, 2016) in addition to facilitating the subjects' open responses and not brief answers (Petrescu et al., 2017). This exercise was guided by review of extant literature to explore and understand themes connected with delayed graduation and dropout incidents in universities. Generating the instrument, we ensured gaining insights into themes relevant to the research topic; appraised the relevant literature for conceptual understandings. Besides, we also noted important domains and recurring issues that are connected with our research focus; leading to development of our question guide a few of which are: *To your understanding, what is the expected age of joining Nigerian universities for undergraduate/degree programmes?, Generally, what in your*

experience would influence student persistence (the extent to which students will continue with his/her programme from one year to the next), degree completion and time spent to graduate? And, at what level of study do students normally experience challenges and what happens when this occurs? On enrollees, university and sense of belonging (engagement and connectedness) the study also inquired: How in your opinion, does student's being connected to the university, and extent to which the student feel welcomed help to influence his/her studentship or candidature in the university. On curriculum and research-practice gap we inquired: How do you think the design of academic programmes and nature of programmes by university impact students, their college experience and academic performance? Amongst others, we tried to discover how 'pull factors'—financial worries, out-of-school employment, family changes, wedlock and childbirth have aided graduation delay or dropout in schools: Besides the factors you have highlighted, what personal—private factors of the student would affect degree graduation or dropping out of school?

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Collecting Data for the Study

We secured a letter from the coordinating institution of this grant-aided study - Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University (ATBU) Bauchi to the management of our respective universities of study for approval to participate in the study. We employed the use of interview technique to understand the nuances and circumstances that surround delayed graduation and dropout conundrum amongst undergraduate university enrollees in Northeast Nigeria (see e.g., Mohajan, 2018; Petrescu et al., 2017). Differently, we likewise employed the use of group depth interviews—as use of focus groups remains the best method to gain insights into a research problem that is underexplored, as well as gain in-depth understanding of social issues, investigate attitudes, motivations and behaviours that are complex to understand (see e.g., Johnstone, 2016; Nyumba et al., 2018). Epistemologically, using FGD technique was apt to stimulating respondents to disclose commonness and differences in perspectives (Adler et al., 2019) and ontologically, we considered the nature of the social entities and phenomenon involved (Bahari, 2010). The data-gathering exercise commenced from January through June, 2024. Sessions for respondents were conducted on school basis with 44 interview and 12 FGD sessions; lasting an average of 64mins with sessions audio-recorded (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Constructivism maintains that multiple realities exist and individuals would construct knowledge through their lived and shared experiences (Moon & Plaines, 2019). Thus, we engaged multiple data sources to gain diverse perspectives and aid triangulation of data corpus within and across the respondents; with the use of two data gathering procedures to collect data for the research design (Renz et al., 2018). As a gold standard rigour, we avoided *a priori*, a premeditated sample size to aid data saturation, determining the suitability of the sample size when nothing new could be further offered in addition to nuances, emics and lived experiences already communicated (Boddy, 2016). Ethical to qualitative researches, we communicated the objectives of the study and benefits of higher education to our respondents before voluntarily signing the informed consent form with a copy retained by each respondent. Apart from pledging confidentiality of contents of

information declared, we ensured the respondents were covered by the ethical provision of beneficence and maleficence as clauses in qualitative researches. Again, we adopted the use of pseudonyms for the safety and security of our respondents and their institutions.

Analysing the Data

We analysed the respondents' data corpus by first conducting a verbatim transcription of the data set (Witcher, 2010); including observing latent contents—body languages and psychological cues—sighs, silence, laughter and similar behaviours displayed whilst the sessions were on for possible citations to advance reliability and validity of the study (see e.g., Azevedo et al., 2017; Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Using pen-and-paper analytic procedure, data were organised and sorted out by the second and third author in line with our question guides whilst the first author embarked on precoding of the texts (see e.g., Saldana, 2013; Theron, 2015) to identify codes and categories (see e.g., Suleiman et al., 2021; Tessier, 2012). Reading the transcripts back and forth during precoding, we observed striking portions that appeared in the texts and highlighted such, consistent with Abdulsalam et al., (2023) and Johnson and Menna (2017). One of the shared roles of the researchers during transcription was ensuring immersion as much as researcher familiarising themselves with the data (Petty et al., 2012) to identify feasible codes, categories and emergent themes following the analytic design by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Maguire and Delahunt (2017). Concluding the First and Second cycle coding, we reexamined the originally compiled open-ended responses for correctness of interpretations of the data by engaging constant comparative analysis (Myers et al., 2016). Coding or recoding the data for the second time, we condensed codes with conceptual similarities and those that either overlapped or shared co-occurrences (see e.g., Guest & McLellan, 2003; Saldana, 2013). This exercise enabled discarding codes which seemed like good ideas during the First cycle coding, given their redundancy after review (Saldana, 2013). Successively, we grouped concepts that relate with each/one an-other into higher-order categories with subconceptual codes, reviewing further the codes for

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consistency and representativeness. Further still, we ensured that labels used for codes are apt, compared codes across respondents' data corpus to identify similarities, variations, patterns and relationships (Petty et al., 2012) as we observed the big picture—the emergent 'storylines'; the 'meta-narratives' from the data (Stuckey, 2015; p.8). Going back and forth, we conceptualised the relationships between the emergent categories, sequel to our research questions. At the final stages of the analysis, we endeavoured to copy title of each of the categories onto index cards, and sorted out the cards into groupings, consistent with our research questions (Johnson & Menna, 2017). In our search for themes and their categories, we revisited our preliminary analysis, reading short extracts that presented a clear sense of whether or not the content has adequately represented our research questions (Davidson et al., 2019). These extracts were later compared and contrasted to create themes capable of representing some level of patterned responses within the respondents' data corpus (see e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). To make sense of emergent themes and their categories, we did review and named themes, including their respective categories severally to ensure aptness of interpretation of the data, reasonability and logicity of the themes, as well as discovering overlaps. This exercise led

to theme fine-tuning; relabelling or renaming of some themes for purposes of accuracy, exactitude and sense making. Overall, the analysis of the data lasted for eighty-nine days.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

This section addresses factors that define the time spent to attain degrees, and why cases of dropout in public universities in Northeast Nigeria become persistent. For ease of understanding, the glitches have been catalogued and narrowed into four quadrants, namely: non-academic constraints—student individual level factors (*quadrant one*), and institutional constraints—symbolising non-individual constrictions (*quadrant two*). Other snags that narrow enrollees' chance to degree attainment in the good nick of time according to respondents' data are societal and labour market factors (*quadrant three*), and Vision for tomorrow—future direction to solving the problem (*quadrant four*). Emerging from the four quadrants are six themes and a stream of categories; namely: (i) Student individual level factors; (ii) Lacking in academic plan and preparation; and (iii) Playing the adult roles. Others include; (iv) Immediate degree attainment and blockades; (v) The doubt about future of higher education; and (vi) Future thinking. The themes and their categories are herewith presented with their corresponding respondent identifier.

Quadrant One: Non-academic constraints—Student individual level factors

Theme 1: Financial Impediments—a critical constraint

Across all the institutions consulted, one recurrent factor remains the financial crises and hardships that piercingly confront degree-seekers as they put in for their university education. Emerging as a glitch, enrollees experience financial problems mostly at two

levels: cost reality at the point of entry into the university; and financial incapability as college tuition costs continue to intensify and soar within the first and second year. The explanations by a pool of FGD respondents validate this position. For instance, Mubarak—a 300Level student of Islamic Studies responded:

With all sense of modesty, students start to experience financial problem in the first year because they do not have a true picture of the other costs that normally go with registration. By the time you move to your second year, you live off campus—meaning you're renting an apartment with others and normally the cost is high. When you join this with your tuition, your living allowance and others, many students have problem maintaining themself [Line 4-10, 15/1/24].

The claim was proven by another FGD respondent—Umar, a 200Level Medical student who has incidentally enjoyed

scholarship supports that helped reduce the plights suffered by colleagues in the following way:

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I've been enjoying scholarship from my secondary school and so no financial/or emotional sufferings or any kind of mental torture to navigate my programme. This is not so with some colleagues who find the going tough right from their day-one in the university, especially when tuition is adjusted [Line 12-15, 18/1/24].

The contributions by King—a Physics lecturer substantiate how financial constraints and lack of supports for enrollees from

household in needs continue to impose hardship on this class of students as well as on their persistence and retention:

Many of these students are indigent; so, they lack the carrying capacities ... really deserving of financial assistance from government, from members of public. Due to their poor financial status, many of them turn to be uncommitted, become disinterested a kind of in schooling, often affected more by hike in tuitions [Line 46-50, 24/1/24].

Given financial pressures, enrollees are in most instances critically exposed to poor living conditions, more so, as cost-of-living crisis continues to soar and linger unabatedly. Whilst

the living condition calls for helps, there is often no hardship funding to support victim enrollees. According to Abu Fatima—an Economics lecturer and an interviewee:

It goes beyond the universities. The present economic crisis affects students in tertiary institutions. Most of them live below standard [wiped his face and continued], poor feeding; unhealthy living and daily adjustments without help. Unless there're interventions, the situation is pathetic, pitiable [Line 27-, 17/2/24].

A further disclosure by an FGD respondent—Comrade; a 300Level Political Science enrollee exposes the time-between-

meals that is currently in practice amongst enrollees and quality of meals that they need to live with often times. For instance:

We eat to keep body and soul together, continue to manage and manage. For breakfast I go for puff and water, or sometimes add 'kunnun' or 'akamun'—our local drinks to attend lectures. Dinner ... anything solid, or what is available. This is common to students ... in most universities [Line 16-18, 24/2/24].

From respondents' accounts, it is evident that financial impediments are a key determinant in what defines enrollees' candidature in universities in communities of this study and deeply, the nature of their commitment and devotion to studies. Thus, facing despicable situations has become what enrollees have to contend with, if they need to complete their higher education.

Theme 2: Lacking in Academic Plan and Preparation

A large contingent of enrollees fails to demonstrate a clear pathway and vision—lacking the requisite academic plan as they enroll for their higher education as revealed by respondents' datasets. This deficiency overtly often conveys the ill-preparedness both cognitive and psychological, of enrollees to face the rigours intrinsic to academic and higher education. Amongst others, age of entry was identified as a factor that could lead an enrollee into developing a comprehension problem and underperformance. Ugi—a Librarian and an interviewee recounted:

Maturity counts, it counts. A student who is admitted at age 15 into university is yet to be mentally fit and emotionally matured compared to those of 17, 18 or 19 years [Line 14-15, 20/2/24].

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Maisamari—a staff in the academic office in one of the institutions and an interviewee similarly responded:

Majority of them still behave as they do in their secondary schools; cognitive and psychological-wise [paused], still looking innocent, childlike, inexperienced. Their ways and manners of doing things, of responding show they're clueless, naïve ... we observe all these as they join the university [Line 52-55, 11/3/24].

On mechanisms explored to address the unwholesome attributes displayed by new enrollees in order to enlist and synchronise the

individuals with their new learning environment, Emmanuela—a lecturer and an interviewee chipped in thus:

Part of our responsibilities is to offer orientation service as they join the system, make a familiarisation tour of the new community. We also serve them with our student handbook to reduce nostalgia, their being home-sick [Line 56-59, 11/3/24].

Coming from various sociocultural milieu with different worldviews affect the meaning that enrollees ascribe to higher education. It is often the case, that enrollees display untoward attitudes and practices that exhibit nonchalance, and a demonstration of poor perception of their new learning environment

and the cumbersomeness of the curriculum as they join tertiary institutions. This is more so, as a host of the enrollees failed to contribute in the process leading to the course/career selection as revealed by many of the respondents. The testimony by Cece—a 300Level Biology Education student reads:

That whether I was ever assisted by the school counsellor in the process of choosing my course. No, I did not, my parents, or let me say my dad decided that I should study Vet. Medicine, upon wasting two years, my sister advised I should go for Biology Education [Line 9-12, 13/4/24].

Apart from failing to meet counsellors for help, enrollees submit to peer influence as far as choice of majors is concerned, and specifically, whilst embarking on choosing

future careers. Zainab Giade is a lecturer in Vocational and Technology Education department and an interviewee. According to her:

Negative peer influence. Besides parents, to choose their majors at SS1 level—the 4th year in their college; students compare among themselves; they choose same as friends, same course as in their colleagues. It's a common thing among schoolers [Line 28-32, 17/5/24].

This development results into less than average performance for victim enrollees; heralding in most instances to underperformance and programme swapping owing to extremely low cgpa and failing to graduate within one's residency. Resulting from

these are enrollees withdrawing or being withdrawn from programme for lack of capacity to attain graduation. Narrating the episode in a literal sense, Emzee—an English and Literature lecturer and an interviewee lamented:

I see it more of transitional problem. To say this in my language 'yadda ka ganta, haka na ganta' meaning 'as you see it, so it also appears to me.' With a damning cgpa, many things can follow, like change of course, withdrawal, students dropping out or leaving the university late ... I mean underperformance [Line 6-7, 9/3/24]



Another interviewee—Abubakar Muhammad, an Economics lecturer substantiated:

Input determines output, the quality of output is a function of the quality of input [Line 24, 17/1/24].

Emergence of social media has devastating effects on the quality of study and reading habits generally of enrollees according to data. Submissions by enrollees imply that they adapt to negative use of social media; networking on non-academic activities and spending more time to socialise and

communicate during the day and often deep into the night. For instance, Asabe—a 500Level FGD respondent of Chemistry Education did acknowledge her obsession and addiction to use of her Android phone and social networking similar to Jojo; Adamu; and Maimuna. According to the respondent:

I love it, I admire it, my Android phone, I connect with others; Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and watch TikTok ... I just love it, spend my time on phone, to keep me lively ... I also *try to find time* for my schoolwork, yes try to find time. To be honest I spend time on phone [Line 68-71, 9/3/24].

It is explicable that owing to lack of direction and cluelessness, enrollees are bound to experience goal setting problems as they continue to invest their time and resources on nonhuman capital initiatives. This is deductible from the different submissions by respondents.

residency, often owing to ideological/spiritual reasons or other factors to fulfill their sensual and amorous desires within legal limits. This implies that married enrollees would be laden by need to strategically play spousal and parent roles; sometimes sooner as they join the university or a little later. Commenting, Yamai—a non-academic staff and an interviewee elucidated:

Theme 3: Playing the Adult Roles

A reasonable number of the enrollees assume adult roles within the period of their Individuals who come to the university come with their sensual and biological feelings. They understand the concept of marriage, from moral or spiritual position, and are free to exercise their rights to marriage and become parents in the process if they so choose [Line 68-70, 9/3/24].

In terms of timing, playing the adult role or going for marriage takes place sometimes shortly on resumption of studentship, or could stretch to a period far from

matriculation so as to settle down. AbdurRahman Sudais—a staff in academic office and an interviewee remarked:

The timing differs, it can be shortly after gaining admission—in the first year or sometime later, but we experience this, being adult students [Line 8-9, 9/3/24].

Marriage becomes core in some contexts and obviously inseparable from some individuals, specifically for female enrollees as soft target who are vulnerable to exploitation as

alluded generally by respondents. This perception was generally presented by respondents. For instance, Alhaji—a lecturer in Law department and an interviewee reported:

Student marriage affects the two groups. As soft target, female students could be exploited, manipulated and why they may need to enter into matrimony for their safety, their security [Line 12-13, 29/5/24].

Additional financial responsibilities are involved for male enrollees who enter into

matrimony with measly income. This factor leads to engaging supplemental source/s of

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income for family sustenance, in efforts to maintain/better family's purchasing power, running cost/cost-of-living. This also heralds to poor class attendance in most cases as it was encored repeatedly by respondents to affirm

challenges that confront undergraduates who opt for wedlock whilst in school. Submitting to this, Ismail Ibrahim—a 400Level Engineering student and an FGD respondent proclaimed:

Really, the situation here is tempting, but then many of the married students need to work; so may miss lectures; lack time for group discussions; come to lectures late ... they work to live up to expectation., live fine [Line 78-82, 11/2/24].

Some of the enrollees had gone into family life before coming for their baccalaureate or bachelor's degree. This class of enrollees also need to meet up with benchmarks and deadlines. In terms of persistence, women are

more affected, often visibly worn-out by matrimonial responsibilities and burdens of childrearing. Hauwa—an administrative staff and an interviewee responded thus:

When we talk of persistence, or commitment to programmes, married students hardly have time to fully get involved due to family responsibilities ... their level of devotion is low. For females, it's a case of divided loyalty, they struggle with childcare and parenting matters [Line 46-49, 4/2/24].

These happenstances occasion poor academic performance and achievement level, including inability to execute a course of action for degree attainment by enrollees. Waziri—a

300Level Computer Science student and an FGD respondent encapsulates the perspectives thus:

Lack of concentration, dividing one's attention always make students resit courses or perform badly such that they cannot cope when they lose focus, start losing interest in the programme [Line 82-83, 4/2/24].

Given the alluded antecedents, combining family headship or family life with higher education could be exerting and

unfavourable to early graduation and degree completion, particularly with the prevailing economic recession in Nigeria.

Quadrant Two: Institutional Constraints – Non-individual Impediments

Theme 4: Immediate Degree Attainment and Blockades

The Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) conducts the entry examination into Nigerian higher institutions, thus setting the entry level scores. Complementary to JAMB's decision rule, universities also set a benchmark. An entry level problem occurs, where the score

for admission into universities is low. A low admission entry score is a strong indicator to low performance and deductively, a pointer to delayed graduation, course swapping or withdrawal from university according to respondents. For instance, Abubakar Muhammad—an Economics lecturer lamented:

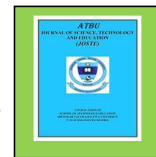
... output is a function of the quality of input [sipped water]. If you admit a student with a score as low as 140 marks—from the four JAMB subjects instead of 200^(or +), you're admitting the student with an aggregate score of 35 marks per subject, which is 'F' in a semester exam ... this is where resitting and carryover begins [Line 24-27, 17/1/24].

Accounts by FGD respondents attest discretely to the claim by Abubakar Muhammad and more. One of the submissions was from

Janet—a 400Level Agric. Economics student who perceives early graduation as a correlate of both entry level score from Unified Tertiary

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Matriculation Examination (UTME) by JAMB and grades obtained via West African School

Certificate Examination (WASCE); and National Examination Council (NECO). In her words:

My father would tell me, garbage in garbage out, if your WASCE-NECO results are bad, plus your UTME score, even if they bring your admission letter home, you'll only manage to graduate [Line 4-5, 29/3/'24].

Securing or granting admission with low scores could be riddled with problematic happenstances, contrary to experiences from groundbreakers and gifted enrollees who join the university with profoundly resounding scores and grades. Respondents were unanimous to the extent that enrollees with low

entry scores find it agonising passing core and critical courses. This development leads to resitting and carrying over courses, and needing to float courses for victims. BSadiq—a lecturer from Vocational Technology Education department and an interviewee submitted:

Students who are admitted with low entry scores, unlike the case with high-achievers and gifted students have problems navigating easily through critical courses to their programmes, they resit and carryover courses, seek floating of courses ... they seldom do without spending more time [Line 43-45, 23/3/ '24].

Besides entry score problem, inappropriate placement of enrollees by universities impact performances by enrollees with time, owing to low coping and carrying capacities at the start of such programmes, and

given subsequent loss of interest and lukewarm attitude to studies. The submission by Yamai—a non-academic staff and an interviewee robustly captures respondents' accounts on this:

When offered a different course, the student right from day one has a task ahead of him. Of course, a few do cope, many don't ... for lack of strategies to cope, lack of interest in the programme, they fail, they graduate late [Line 63-65, 24/4/ '24].

Supporting this position, James—an Accounting lecturer commented:

Offering them courses in which they have no interest ... this leads to crossover to other programmes. In the new programme the student may manage to sail through or may be unlucky, there could be extremely low cgpa which determines either to be withdrawn, or to voluntarily withdraw [Line 66-68, 25/5/ '24].

Deterioration in the funding of tertiary education has drastically affected the quality of services provided to enrollees, including their welfare. Owing to poor funding, enrollees have to grapple with problem of crowded lecture-rooms, lack or shortage of accommodation, a

situation which has compelled many of the enrollees living off-campus with shylock rent-owners taking advantage of this. Maxwell—a 400Level Industrial Chemistry student and an FGD resident commented:

We have situations where the lecture-rooms are seriously filled up, seats broken, poor lighting and poor ventilation, so some students leave before the end of the lecture. Not all the students have accommodation within the campus, many of them live off-k, have to pay so much or squat with a friend, you settle the electricity bill, buy water ... it's a serious problem [Line 29-32, 24/4/ '24].

The academic environment continues to pose threats. Enrollees who live off-campus

attend lectures late, or are absent from lectures owing to distance and mobility problem.

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Besides, such enrollees seldom take part in group discussions given challenge of time as most discussions hold evening times. Alfa—a

400Level student of Agronomy and an FGD respondent proclaimed:

I miss lectures occasionally, you get to the park, the bus is empty, what can you do, and the lecture time is almost over, so sometimes I stay away. Like group discussions, you cannot attend because of distance, you also consider security (Line 39-41, 16/1/'24).

Insecurity is a major problem in Northeast and in some states in Nigeria. This problem affects school activities both curricular and hobby-based. Lectures in most instances do not run beyond 4:00pm in some universities. Aggravating this, there are erratic power

supplies and constant outages, restricting private/group readings, outdoor and side activities within campuses to day times. Hauwa'u—a staff in Academic office and an interviewee like other respondents observed:

... Lectures in far north universities mostly end by 4:00pm for security reason, hardly go beyond that. There's often no light, the university cannot make a constant supply of light 24/7, considering the economic situation, the cost. Even for offices, recreational activities also take place in broad daylight ... in designated days [Line 24-27, 17/1/'24].

Recent strike actions by Academic Staff Union of Universities—ASUU, and Covid-19 pandemic both have spiral effects on higher education in Nigeria. Generally, institutions were shut down and enrollees made to stay off school for months, however, respondents have argued that persistent strike actions by ASUU have contributed directly to graduation delay in recent times. The inability by the Federal

Government to fulfill the 2009 agreement with the union was responsible for the lingering industrial action, with enrollees trenchantly bearing the brunt as further consolidated by the respondents. The submission by Mr Green—a 300Level student of History and International Studies and an FGD respondent encapsulates this worldview:

I am 25years old. I already have a degree in French. ASUU strikes and Covid-19 have added additional two years on my programme, so automatically I should expect a delayed graduation. The option for me was to cross to a private university but the fund. On why ASUU strike remains on and on? Well the Federal Government is failing to meet the '2009 Agreement' with ASUU according to media report [Line 44-47, 16/2/'24].

The two developments have led to modifications in the academic calendar of universities and merging of sessions to accommodate enrollees who were yet to be

absorbed with humongous responsibilities placed on lecturers. Substantiating, Nakowa—a lecturer in Counselling Psychology and an interviewee reported:

We were affected by the strike and Covid-19 pandemic. Universities had to adjust their calendars, some, if not most admitted two sets of students yet to be enrolled to run merged sessions just to regularise the system and strike a balance [Line 37-39, 28/1/'24].

Teaching abstract course contents without simplification and use of non-learner-centred methodological approaches were identified as a major determinant of academic success. According to respondents, teaching

from simple to complex, known to unknown and adopting learner-friendly approaches for teaching assist enrollees to understand vague and grey areas in a course. The following account by Emzee—an English/Literature

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lecturer and an interviewee suitably captures this position by respondents:

Make learning friendly and majority of the students will pass, especially coming in contact with some of the principles for the first time, you need a learner-friendly method to pass the message, rather than use theoretical ... abstract technique [Line 28-30, 9/3/24].

Attaining bachelor's degree and retention are contingent upon provision of conducive learning environments by relevant stakeholders in tertiary education industry.

Whilst funding remains an albatross, respecting human capital development of the enrollees; including their welfare becomes central and unnegotiable to early graduation.

Quadrant Three: Society and labour market factor

Theme 5: The Doubt about Future of Higher Education

Clearly obvious, education remains the backbone of every nation, and reason why knowledge economy is becoming romanticised worldwide. However, measuring cost and

benefits, and high rate of unemployment have brought disillusionment and cynicism regarding degree attainment and future labour market. Contributing, Mushaffa—a Biochemistry lecturer and an interviewee revealed:

Learning is the key to unlocking the potential of the mind, but then, you see benefactors—sponsors now consider cost, the benefits before they commit to sponsoring their wards ... another is the rate of unemployment in the country ... it's also a cause for alarm, people are quaming [Line 48-50, 28/5/24].

Thus gaining tractions, it is possible that the number of individuals who access tertiary education in future could reduce,

given cost and the poor labour market outcomes. Pete—a 500Level Computer Science student and an FGD respondent lamented:

Education is the foundation upon which an individual builds his future. Regrettably, if you look at the army of unemployed graduates, and more are joining; they're becoming marginalised ... hopeless. Sir investing in education may not be exciting in future [Line 62-64, 11/4/24].

There is predisposition that the number of individuals who access tertiary education in near future may recede or regress. The backsliding in the population of enrollees could on one hand be informed by public rage

about the cost of education in the country and unaffordability, and on the other, the general disenchantment, given the current impasse of unemployment. Zainab Giade commented:

People are not happy with the current situation of unemployment in the country. I've paid attention to negative comments by people and I feel we need innovative and pedagogy to address the massive problem of unemployment in Nigeria. It's like people no longer see the future in education, there's a mismatch in the cost and benefit of education ... that why wasting resources, why not learn a trade and so on [Line 18-21, 17/3/24].

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The unemployment phenomenon was appraised by respondents from two frontiers. On the one hand is earning a degree and not finding a job, and second; the unavailability of

the right job suitable to one's expertise or proficiency. The contribution by Ramatou—a 300L Sociology student and an FGD respondent encapsulates this worldview:

There're two things that happen when you finish and begin to search for jobs, one, you hardly get these days, and second you may get something that nearly frustrates you, a job you never can think of [Line 54-55, 19/3/24].

Bosco—a non-academic staff and an interviewee further complemented the

submission by Ramatou like other respondents thus:

When you graduate at age 22-23, did your Youth Corps, and stay jobless till 28, they like to employ only applicants who're less than 28years and already you're 29; you better go for anything, or you become an artisan—a menial-jobber [Line 62-64, 19/3/24].

Unemployment as a public concern comes with emotional torture and demoralisation, as prospective enrollees of higher education are disparaged or sneered at, with unpleasant comments passed often to forecast pessimism in higher education. This development does subjugate enrollees into

combining trading, handcraft or traineeship with education in modern times with impact on degree attainment. For instance, Saddam—a lecturer in Chemical Engineering and an interviewee sharing from the worldviews of others affirmed:

It sounds somehow depressing ... that your future is gloomy by relying on your university education for earnings according to peers out there, peers who're into other things, not in school but are making it; especially when you approach them for 'alfarma' (help, support) [Line 79-81, 22/4/24].

Enrollees who suffer delayed graduation often have difficulties raising tuitions and living costs to complete their studies whilst their counterparts who drop out sometimes fail to go back to school. Reprehensibly, neither of the two sets of enrollees evades stigmatisation

as extra grants are required for institutions to cope with bulging entrollee population. This perspective by respondents was aptly captured by Josephine—a Counselling Psychology lecturer and an interviewee:

Not all about the student who's unable to graduate on time, what about the society. Delayed students may live at the mercy of others to complete. For those who pullout, many hardly go back to school. Then the humiliation suffered, you're looked upon as disappointing the family, the society. On the part of the university, additional supports are required, the facilities are stretched daily [Line 69-72, 20/5/24].

In conclusion, the nexus between tertiary education and unemployment underlines the need for a paradigm shift in education policy to promote skill development in enrollees, employability education and industry

relevance. It is also unarguable that education *per se* can no longer guarantee employment, thus, forecasting the need for lifelong learning as well as adaptability.



Quadrant Four: Vision for Tomorrow

Theme 6: Forward Thinking

Exploring how to improve the problem of delayed graduation, respondents considered the future of higher education and degree attainment as bleak and unwelcoming. This understanding has triggered respondents into resourcefully proposing a roadmap to success—seemingly, a course for action and

future direction to rescue higher education from imminent recession. Among others, the future trajectory designed by respondents did postulate adapting to new global practices to navigate the demands of higher education. For instance, Abu Fatima—one of the interviewees commented:

Institutions must try to tie the loose ends—ensure that they keep to global practices as far as higher education is concerned, the standard operating procedure must be adhered to [Line 4-5, 16/2/24].

Higher institutions have ample demands to attend to, however, within measly resources. In effect, balancing competing priorities in the face of sprawling demands

becomes important according to respondents. The submission by Comrade—a 300Level Political Science student and an FGD respondent vividly encapsulates this position:

We students agree that universities have so much to handle, towards students and university administration, management must learn to strike a middle level position, a balance among the many demands [Line 4-6, 16/2/24].

Though striking balance among competing forces are core; yet, universities need to maintain focus amidst distractions and interferences to retain their institutional

culture—values, norms and beliefs to improve academic achievements. Speaking on these, AbdurRahman Sudais—an Academic Officer and an interviewee observed:

They universities should create a conducive learning environment, am talking of respecting values, the institutional norms to achieve their mission and vision statements, to improve student and learning outcomes, faculty-staff-student relationship must also be good— as a groundnorm [Line 19-21, 15/4/24].

Support services, specifically counselling services were robustly recommended crosswise staff and students to promote students' wellbeing and academic

success in addition to dealing with crisis situations to manage stress among enrollees. One of the FGD respondents—Mutmainna responded:

I would like the university to monitor students who need counselling for their academic improvement to be fished out, some students need to be taught how to cope. Staff also require counselling like students for many things [Line 38-11, 9/4/24].

Cases of mental health— anxiety disorder, depression, difficulty concentrating, feeling of worthlessness, mood swings, substance abuse and relationship problems abound among enrollees.

Early counselling interventions according to respondents are important to address these. In the words of Jemima—an FGD respondent and a 400Level student of Sociology:

Most students think counselling is all about talking about career or job-fixing. But there're many areas where counselling becomes useful, like in helping those who pass through trauma, depression, character and behaviour problem, even relationship problem as we attain adulthood, some of us feel we are not achieving despite doing

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much, those who take drugs, we need trained counsellors to help us out [Line 65-67, 12/3/24].

Interviewees were of a fervent belief that it is high time counselling services were accorded a central place in tertiary institutions, suggesting the need for mental health

education in addition to early therapeutic intervention by counselling experts to improve daily functioning and increased productivity:

We need to also consider other medium of intervention; introduce mental health education for students across all the programmes [Line 49, 23/5/24].

Introducing summer semester to correct deficiencies in failed courses is a way of curbing procrastination and thus, delayed graduation and dropout according to

respondents. For instance, MaiMartaba—a 300Level student of Mechanical Engineering and an FGD respondent commented:

In my opinion, universities can help students by introducing summer semesters so that cases of resits and carryovers don't have to delay students, or add more to their years in the university [Line 3-4, 19/1/24].

Respondents observed that offering financial assistance would go a long way into cushioning the harsh economic and financial experiences that enrollees encounter, as this

impacts enrollees in different waysjane. The proposition by BSadiq—an interviewee represents the pool of ideas along this continuum. For instance:

I think one of the ways to help the students is to award scholarships. Grants, tuition waiver, foundation and corporate scholarships will all alleviate the students of their financial sufferings and burdens [Line 27-29, 18/4/24].

By addressing the root causes of delayed graduation and dropout, tertiary institutions can improve student outcomes, reduce institutional cost on victims of delayed graduation and prospective enrollees who may in future experience dropout. This understanding will create a more-inclusive and supportive learning environment and increased graduation rate.

institutions studied by this team of researchers. This enigmatic circumstance emerges often between first and second year of enrollment into tertiary education. At entry point, enrollees suffer from inadequate information concerning the financial/cost implications attached to their chosen courses while commencing their respective programmes; not fully aware of their programmes, contents and quantum of efforts needed to accomplish the programme. Acceptance fee on offer of admission for instance, departmental registration fee, and fee charged by associations and a few other charges are often not known to enrollees. As inflation, and generally as cost-of-living remain galloping and startling; enrollees encounter poor living conditions, and thus, cost-of-living crisis. Transiting to their second year; enrollees are confronted sporadically by higher charges, difficulty defraying new tuition fees and other expenses in addition to cost for personal upkeep, exigencies and sundries. Data have shown that these factors affect enrollees and university completion, owing to the inability by enrollees to continue from second year in view

DISCUSSIONS

Until now, no study has investigated factors that undermine early university completion or university failures in Northeast Nigeria. Thus, employing qualitative research method/exploratory approach, the current study adds to the literature in education, as well as in economics and management of higher education by unravelling phenomena that contribute to delayed graduation and withdrawal from higher education in the community of this study. The initial theme from respondents' datasets reveals happenstances of financial impediments as a major glitch to early graduation and dropout conundrum in tertiary

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of peculiar hitches and financial pressures with often no supports for such students from households in needs. These findings are consistent with the study by Aina et al. (2018) which argues that students' household may impact their capacity to correctly predict benefits—monetary and not, and cost—monetary and not, respecting delay or tertiary education investment, and thus shaping enrollees' outcomes—in the sense of dropping out, completing programme on time or not, and Bosci et al., (2019) which observes that abilities/skills to comply with the study programme requirements and the volume of efforts required all remain unclear to enrollees. This in effect will depict non-achievement on the part of tertiary institutions and higher education, given that 'the goal of an effective education policy is that of increasing the percentage of both enrolled students and graduates' (Aina et al., 2019, p. 10).

Respondents' data have further proven that a host of the enrollees transit to tertiary institutions, lacking in academic plan and preparation. This phenomenon endangers the possibility by enrollees to early attainment of degree as they are faced by impediments which potentially disconnect them from their programmes. Prior to transiting to tertiary institutions, though an unwritten law—and of course doubly not a rule of thumb, it is estimated that enrollees possess both cognitive and psychological maturity to be favourably dispose to facing rigours intrinsic to academic and higher education. The cluelessness and naïveté displayed by enrollees at point of entry often lead to inadequacies and shortages; resulting to underperformance and shortfalls at the initial stage of their higher education. This finding aligns with the study by Sanchez et al. (2016) which posits that academic preparation—i.e., the intensity and quality of secondary level education—is the strongest predictor of persistence through to degree completion. The finding by the study is also in consistence with Daniels et al. (2019) which postulates that students entering university face many stressful experiences; often part of the transition from high school to university. The awareness of the importance of academic preparation has triggered a number of preparation programmes by federal, state, local colleges and nongovernmental sector toward addressing the

problem the last 30 years in the US. For instance, Federal programmes like Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programmes—GEAR UP, Upward Bound, and Talent Search all understand that students from historically underrepresented groups have less college knowledge. Resultant from this, the programmes are directed toward providing support for public schools with a view to tackling the college knowledge gap; to build college readiness pathways for prospective enrollees who lack adequate home and school resources so that they effectively transit to and succeed in college. Each of these programmes provides low-income or first-generation students and families with college preparation information, tutoring, mentoring, and assistance in the college admissions process as further argued by Sanchez et al. (2016).

It is expedient to note that assuming family life (i.e., playing the adult role) whilst the study persists has a far-reaching implication on enrollees—determining the quality of school attendance. The right to marriage whilst still pursuing degree attainment has been maximised by enrollees owing to reasons of personal factors—spiritual, social, reflexive and physiological according to thematic analysis of respondents' data. Playing the spousal or parent roles poses a threat to enrollees who engage in family life in terms of pressure and increased responsibilities—needing to strike a balance between marital life and study, including prioritising financial obligations on academic pursuits as shown by respondents' dataset. In line with the finding by this study, the earlier study by Roksa and Velez (2012) argue that marriage and parenthood can overlap with schooling, besides, these family transitions have often been incompatible with being a student. Similarly, the distinct features of student and marital roles make it difficult to combine the two, noting the commitment of time and financial resources that connect with parenthood which doubly compete with the demands of schooling. In addition, marriage and parenthood generally involve establishing an independent household, which creates a range of new demands and commitments that are often difficult to reconcile being a student (Roksa & Velez, 2012). Nonetheless, a great deal of enrollees lacks the necessary skills to

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assist in their adjustment to university, and their immediate support system (e.g., assistance from family; friends, etc.) is either non-existent, willing or unable to support them (Daniels et al., 2019).

Admissions into Nigerian tertiary institutions is superintended by Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) via a standardised examination with a benchmark entry score into universities. From respondents' dataset, a low-level entry score for admission into universities is a strong indicator for a low performance in future, and deductively, an early warning sign to delayed graduation, course swapping or withdrawal from university. This finding aligns with the study by Liu and Neilson (2011) which affirms that one channel through which pre-college students compete is testing, with admission based solely on each student's score on a college entrance exam as prevalent in China, Ireland and Austria. However, college entrance examinations as standardised tests in general are designed in such a way that other things being equal, students with higher skills would score higher on such tests. Further persistence in university is a function of the pre-entry characteristics of students (high school grades among others); initial career goals and commitment, and academic and social integration of students over the course of the academic year and final commitments at the end of the academic year to either remain in, or leave the institution (Grayson, 2003).

Education is a basic human right, and though the backbone of every nation, however, higher education may sooner than later lose its preeminence—face enrollment problem or reduction in the population of enrollees who register for university degrees given the doubts about future of higher education. Doubts about future of higher education were conspicuously raised by the respondents to showcase despair and anguish that currently surround higher education in the region. Though efforts are being made to revolutionise the education sector, it is obvious that measuring costs—benefits, and high rate of unemployment in Nigeria have brought disillusionment and cynicism regarding degree attainment and future labour market. These valuations have thus ostensibly projected the gloomy and unpromising reality of future of higher education in the location of this study rather than project its viability and potency

to transform. Characteristic to higher education in recent times, the cost to degree attainment in the country has continued to soar, change intensely and inconceivably—showcasing unaffordability on one hand, and degree unattainability on the other. Consolidating this finding, it is argued that education has been remarkably unsuccessful and has done very little to drive and promote the economic productivity in individuals. Reversibility-wise, the public requires an institution that will pursue its social goals in a way that is in line with the individualism at the heart of the liberal ideal, targeting the resolution of social problems by seeking to change the hearts, the minds, and capacities of individual enrollees—'a point of civic pride' (Labaree, 2008; p. 448).

Restructuring degree roadmaps to improve timely graduation and degree attainment, including personal and institutional challenges were proposed by respondents. Enrollees who experience delayed graduation or withdrawal from programmes; either forced or voluntary often suffer stigmatisation and public infamy as a recompense. The implication of this is that the society perceive such enrollees as socially disordered and unfit, facing a grim picture of their personal failing. Consistent with this finding, DesJardins (2002) found that failure to graduate does not necessarily reflect a lack of ability on the part of the enrollee, but understanding the determinants of successful and timely degree completion. As a course for future action, respondents were of the view that keeping to global and best practices, flexibility of course contents, organising summer semester to address re-sit and previously failed examinations as well as institutions respecting values would address issues occasioning delayed graduation. Besides, offering financial aids and aid programmes as much as addressing issues with institutional and personal backgrounds and contexts were proposed by the respondents to cater for persistence and retention. These roadmaps to future direction are in line with Sadowski et al. (2017)'s study which posits that student retention and success is increasingly recognised as a critical issue within the context of widening participation, increased diversity, and higher scrutiny of institutional quality assurance and accountability. Further corroborating the respondents' position for

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keeping to global and best practices, it is argued that student dropout rate should be interpreted as a result of a longitudinal process of interaction between students and the academic and social spheres of their institution as institutions ensure students' ability to integrate socially into their new environment and capable of influencing their levels of interaction for a greater commitment (Venegas-Muggli, 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Emerging from respondents' dataset, the need for universities to engage professional counselling practitioners has become imperative to address nascent cases; either personal-social inclined or education-based. Besides, flexibility of course contents, organising summer semester examinations for students re-sitting previously failed examinations and adhering to core values and institutional norms all would help reduce issues capable of procrastinating time to degree completion. From the data, enrollees, specifically those from low-income households become less-vulnerable to delayed graduation and withdrawal from programme with financial aids and possible assistance. Lastly, it is expedient that degree awarding institutions in the community of the study keep to global and best practices, with a better funding platform by stakeholders to aid management and administration of tertiary institutions in the zone.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results by this study suggest crucial needs for intervention recommendations. *Ab initio*, there is strong recommendation for university management/administration to keep to global practices in the administration of higher education to reduce the risk factor targets that impede timely graduation and degree attainment by enrollees who enlist for higher education in Northeast Nigeria. There is also a paramount need for stakeholders in university administration to nip the problem of first-time freshmen in the bud and at the right nick of time to ensure that entry problems are not transferred to later years of study. Besides, provision of requisite facilities, amenities and resources by government, agencies and relevant nonstate actors to register persistence, reduce underperformance with a view to aiding

retention have become extremely inexorable. Supplemental to these, the study reveal the imperative for financial aids and flexibility of systems, to aid teaching and learning activities in institutions and need for regular mental health education and counselling interventions to assist the mental health needs of enrollees generally and specifically for those who experience delayed graduation or suffer completion period to prevent stress, depression and allied disorders.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations of the study; not able to cover a few of the States in Northeast Nigeria, and generally being delimited to a specific geopolitical zone rather than northern Nigeria, this study extends the current literature on delayed graduation by revealing crucial findings about determinants and nature of risk factors that undermine timely completion of degrees in the areas of this study. Thus, these findings have significant implications for timing and targets of interventions to improve enrollees' timely graduation and degree attainment.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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