Research article

Expectations versus Realities: Insights into the Transition Experiences of International Students at Two Universities in Nigeria

Olaide Agbaje* & Chika Sehoole**

Abstract

Attracting, recruiting and retaining international students should be balanced with the need to provide support for the smooth transition of these students into their host countries and institutions. One way to achieve this transition is by bridging the gap between international students' expectations and actual realities. Hence, this article examines the impact that the expectations and the realities of studying abroad have on the overall transition experiences of international students in Nigeria. The study adopted a mixed method and employed Schlossberg's theory of transition to further understand the phenomenon of transition with regard to international students. Paper questionnaires were collected from 64 international students at two universities in Nigeria, while a subset of 20 (10 from each university) was further interviewed. The findings indicate that unmet expectations contributed largely to difficult transition experiences for the international students in Nigeria.

Keywords

international students' experiences, higher education, university, transition, expectations, realities

Introduction

The increasing demand for international education has brought about intensified efforts by higher education institutions to attract students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds around the world. However, attracting, recruiting and retaining international students should be balanced with the need to provide support for their smooth transition into their host countries and institutions. One way to achieve this is by bridging the gap between international students' expectations and their actual realities. It is natural for international students to check and cross-check their higher education experience by appraising the ways in which their institutions meet their expectations. As Adediran and Coetzee (2019, p. 3) argue, if they cannot be surpassed, international students' expectations should at least be met.

*   Dr Olaide Agbaje is a postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies at the University of Johannesburg and a part-time lecturer in the Department of Education Management and Policy Studies at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4263-6555. Email: laidestar@yahoo.com

** Professor Chika Sehoole is a professor of higher education and the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8087-4258. Email: chika.sehoole@up.ac.za

Several studies (Agbeniga, 2016; Kritz, 2015; Sehoole & Lee, 2015; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015) have examined students' reasons for choosing certain international study destinations. These include funding/scholarship opportunities, quality of education, living conditions and job prospects in the host country. From the viewpoint of developed countries, researchers have reported on the challenges faced by international students in their new study environments (Ashton-Hay, 2016; Bamford, 2008; Calikoglu, 2018, p. 440; Leong, 2015; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Yin, 2013; Zhang, 2016). However, studies that report on the experiences of international students in Africa are limited (Agbeniga, 2017).

The university education system of Nigeria is one of the largest and oldest in Africa. From one university in 1948 to five universities in 1962 and 171 universities (44 federal, 48 state and 79 private universities) in 2020 (Varrella, 2020), the Nigerian university sector has witnessed a rapid expansion in response to the growing population. The rapid expansion began in the 1990s when the Nigerian government approved the establishment of private universities; before then, the university sector was dominated by public universities. Private universities (two thirds of which have religious affiliations) grew from three in 1999 to 68 in 2017, and account for 45% of the total number of universities in the country (*World Education News & Reviews*, 2017). The Nigerian university system is often confronted by long-standing problems such as underfunding, corruption, poor planning and implementation, diminishing research culture, industrial actions, poor teaching and learning outcomes (Iruonagbe et al. 2015). In spite of the growing number of universities in Nigeria, the number of international students in the country is meagre, compared to some African countries such as South Africa and Egypt (Agbeniga, 2017). There is a paucity of data on inbound international students and their experiences, even though some studies have explored the outbound movement of Nigerians undertaking studies in other countries (Madichie & Madichie, 2013; Robert-Okah, 2015). To the best of our knowledge no studies have investigated the transition experiences of inbound international students in Nigeria. This lack of literature posed a major limitation to this study. A gap which this study hopes to fill.

The two Nigerian universities chosen for this study were the University of Ibadan (UI) (public) and Covenant University (CU) (private), both located in South-West Nigeria. These two institutions were carefully chosen based on their institutional ranking. The University of Ibadan (UI) is the premiere university in Nigeria, fondly referred to as the "first and the best". It is currently the best public university in Nigeria and the 18th best university in Africa, according to Webometrics ranking of 2020. Covenant University (CU), a faith-based university, is the best private university in Nigeria and the 22nd best university in Africa according to Webometrics 2020 (World University Rankings, 2020).

This article investigates the impact that prior expectations have on the transition experiences of international students studying at two Nigerian universities. The following sections discuss evidence from the literature on international students in Africa, as well as Schlossberg's theory of transition, which was adopted as a lens to examine the transition experiences of international students in Nigeria.

International Students in Africa

Recruiting international students has been at the forefront of educational discourse in some African countries and institutions. South Africa and Egypt attract the highest number of inbound international students in Africa (Sehoole & Lee, in press). South Africa remains the most popular African destination for internationally mobile students across the globe (Lee & Sehoole, 2015; Majee & Ress, 2020). In North Africa, Egypt accounts for the highest number of international students, particularly from the North African region and the Middle East (Marei, 2018). In West Africa, countries like Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal account for a considerable number of international students from the region. In East Africa, international students find Uganda and Kenya to be viable study destinations (Kiiza, 2019).

In spite of the significant efforts of some African countries in recruiting international students, very few studies have explored the experiences of inbound international students. A study conducted by Adediran and Coetzee (2019, p. 1) investigated the service expectations and the real service experienced by 325 international students at a university of technology in South Africa. Findings revealed that the overall quality of service delivery offered to international students at the university was poor; students' expectations were not met in the areas of academic support, accommodation, quality of education and infrastructure for leisure activities. Consequently, institutions must ensure that the gap between expectation and reality is largely bridged, as the effect of a mismatch between expectations and reality could be devastating. Similarly, positive experiences will emanate from met or surpassed expectations.

Transition Theory

Schlossberg's theory of transition was adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. First propounded by Nancy Schlossberg in 1981 to analyse how humans adapt to transition, particularly in the context of psychology, the theory has since undergone some developments to analyse transition to other contexts, such as higher education. Transition refers to any event or non-event that results in changed roles, relationships, routines and assumptions (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33). According to Schlossberg (2011), the first step in dealing with change is to understand the different types of transition, namely anticipated, unanticipated and non-event transitions. Anticipated transitions are expected life events, such as getting married, unanticipated transitions are disruptive events that happen unexpectedly, such as a life-threatening illness, while non-event transitions are the life events that are expected but fail to occur, such as not getting married.

Transition theory (Schlossberg, 1989) can be used to understand the experiences of higher education students and to accommodate these through a variety of responses in their transition processes. International students experience various changes when studying in an unfamiliar context. In the context of this study, these transition experiences hinge largely on whether the transition was anticipated, unanticipated or a non-event. Nonetheless, Schlossberg (2011) argues that it is not the transition itself or the type of transition experienced that matters most, rather it is the way one responds to it. How

international students cope with transition is influenced by four aspects of transition otherwise known as the four S's – Situation, Self, Support and Strategies (Schlossberg, 2011). The first 'S', Situation, has to the do with the variables that trigger transition, such as undertaking international study and the duration of the transition, which can be temporary, permanent, or uncertain. The second 'S', Self, refers to a person's personal, psychological and demographic characteristics, including gender, age, country of origin and socio-economic status, while psychological characteristics include spirituality, ego and self-esteem. The third 'S', Support, refers to the level of help an individual receives from family, friends, the community, or even relationships in the transition process, which influences an individual's ability to respond to transition appropriately. The fourth 'S', Strategy, is the specific method adopted by an individual to cope with transition; while some individuals modify the situation, some control the meaning of the problem, and others devise ways to manage stress (Evans et al., 2010).

Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) argue that students' perceptions largely determine the negativity or positivity of their transition experiences. Similarly, we argue that international students' transition experiences are a function of their met or unmet expectations. Schlossberg's theory of transition is useful in understanding how prior expectations and actual realities influence the transition of the international students in Nigeria. Moreover, the four aspects of transition shed light on the complexities involved in the way transition experiences differ from one individual to another.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed method research approach to address the following research question: To what extent do the expectations and the realities of studying in Nigeria impact on the transition experiences of international students? Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in order to obtain comprehensive responses or data. Four criteria guided the selection of the participants/respondents: (1) they had to be registered as international students, (2) enrolled in a full undergraduate or postgraduate course, (3) able to communicate in English, and (4) have completed at least one semester.

The total number of international students at UI at the time of this research was estimated by the Office of International Programmes as around 400, with reportedly 30 international students at CU. Quantitatively, a total population sample was used so that all international students at both universities would potentially complete the questionnaire, given that the total population of international students in both universities is fairly small. A structured and tested paper questionnaire was administered to 110 international students at the two universities (80 questionnaires at UI and 30 at CU). Of these, a total of 64 questionnaires were completed and retrieved from both universities (42 from UI and 22 from CU). Qualitatively, a subset of 20 international students (10 from each university) was interviewed for qualitative analysis through semi-structured, one-on-one interaction. Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants, who were purposefully selected using snowball sampling. In addition, relevant institutional documents were consulted to substantiate the data. The questionnaire was

useful in gathering biographical data from the respondents, as well as basic responses on their prior expectations and the reality of studying in Nigeria, while the interview provided more detailed responses on how prior expectations and actual realities influenced the participants' transition experiences.

Qualitative data were manually transcribed and emailed to all the participants for member checking, after which they were analysed using thematic analysis. The quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 24.

Background data on the questionnaire respondents

This subsection gives an overview of the background characteristics of the 64 international students who completed the questionnaire at the two universities. These characteristics include region of origin, gender and the first languages of the respondents.

Table 1: Frequency showing the gender, type of degree, first language, region of origin and residence of the respondents at the private and the public university

			University		Total
			Private university	Public university	
Gender	Female	Count	7	14	21
		Expected count	7.2	13.8	21.0
		% within university	31.8%	33.3%	32.8%
		Standardised residual	–.1	.1	
	Male	Count	15	28	43
		Expected count	14.8	28.2	43.0
		% within university	68.2%	66.7%	67.2%
		Standardised residual	.1	.0	
Total		Count	22	42	64
		Expected count	22.0	42.0	64.0
		% within university	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

			University		Total
			Private university	Public university	
First language	English	Count	16	8	24
		Expected count	8.3	15.8	24.0
		% within university	72.7%	19.0%	37.5%
		Standardised residual	2.7	–2.0	
	French	Count	2	23	25
		Expected count	8.6	16.4	25.0
		% within university	9.1%	54.8%	39.1%
		Standardised residual	–2.2	1.6	
	Other	Count	4	11	15
		Expected count	5.1	9.8	14.9
		% within university	18.2%	26.2%	23.4%
		Standardised residual	–.6	.4	
Total		Count	22	42	64
		Expected count	22.0	42.0	64.0
		% within university	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Region	West Africa	Count	10	32	42
		Expected count	14.4	27.6	42.0
		% within university	45.5%	76.2%	65.6%
		Standardised residual	–1.2	.8	
	East Africa	Count	2	9	11
		Expected count	3.8	7.2	11.0
		% within university	9.1%	21.4%	17.2%
		Standardised residual	–.9	.7	
	Southern Africa	Count	5	1	6
		Expected count	2.1	3.9	6.0
		% within university	22.7%	2.4%	9.4%
		Standardised residual	2.0	–1.5	
	Other	Count	5	0	5
		Expected count	1.7	3.3	5.0
		% within university	22.7%	0.0%	7.8%
		Standardised residual	3.5	–2.5	
Total		Count	22	42	64
		Expected count	22.0	42.0	64.0
		% within university	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Of the international student population that completed the questionnaire, 67.2% were male (n = 43) which was twice the percentage of female students, at 32.8% (n = 21). A further breakdown of the total population reveals seven females and 15 males at the private university compared to 14 females and 28 males at the public university. The gender composition of the international students at both universities was not reported to have had any impact on their transition experiences. At both universities, 39.1% (n = 25) of the respondents spoke French, closely followed by 37.5% (n = 24) who spoke English, while the remaining 23.4% (n = 15) reportedly spoke eleven other first languages. At the private university, more respondents than were expected had English as a first language (observed 16, expected 8.3), while fewer were French speaking (observed 2, expected 8.6). At the public university, fewer respondents than expected had English as a first language (observed eight, expected 15.8), while more had French (observed 23, expected 16.4). Due to the heterogenic nature of the respondents' countries of origin (23 countries were reported), the countries were grouped into regions (see Table 1). Table 1 indicates 42 international students from West Africa (suggesting a phenomenon of regionalisation), 11 from East Africa and six from Southern Africa, while the remaining five were from outside Africa (two from Europe and three from the USA). Table 2 below shows how international students' expectations matched their actual realities across the two universities.

Table 2: A cross tabulation showing if international students' expectations matched their realities of studying in Nigeria

			University		Total
			Private university	Public university	
Did your expectation of Nigeria prior to studying here match the actual reality?	Yes	Count	11	15	26
		Expected count	8.9	17.1	26.0
		% within university	50.0%	35.7%	40.6%
		Standardised residual	.7	–.5	
	No	Count	11	27	38
		Expected count	13.1	24.9	38.0
		% within university	50.0%	64.3%	59.4%
		Standardised residual	–.6	.4	
Total		Count	22	42	64
		Expected count	22.0	42.0	64.0
		% within university	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Of the 64 respondents who completed the questionnaire at both universities, 40.6% (n = 26) reported that their expectations were met by the reality, as opposed to 59.4% (n = 38) who reported a mismatch. Concerning the findings per university, 50% of the international students at the private university had their expectations met while the expectations of the remaining 50% were not. At the public university, only 35.7% of the international students

had their expectations met, while 64.3% did not. Accordingly, the number of those who experienced a mismatch between their expectations and reality exceeded those whose expectations were matched by reality. However, Fisher's exact test showed no significant difference between the two universities (p-value = 0.296).

Interview Results

The interview participants originated from 12 anglophone and francophone African countries namely, Mali, Zambia, Kenya, Benin Republic, Cameroon, Ghana, Western Sahara, Niger Republic, South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, and Zimbabwe (see Table 3 below). The participants comprised 15 males and five females and had spent between one and four years in Nigeria. While all the interview participants from UI were postgraduate students studying on scholarships, all those from CU were undergraduate students on either a scholarship or self-funded. Regarding the gender make up of questionnaire respondents, having more male participants than females was purely random: the first 20 participants who showed willingness and availability were interviewed.

Table 3: Total number of interviewees and their countries of origin

Country of origin	Number of interviewees
Mali	3
Zambia	3
Kenya	2
Benin Republic	2
Cameroon (Anglophone)	2
Ghana	2
Western Sahara	1
Niger Republic	1
South Africa	1
Cote d'Ivoire	1
Togo	1
Zimbabwe	1
Total	20

The participants will be referred to as S1 to S20 to maintain the ethical protocol of anonymity. Five of the participants alluded to their expectations meeting the actual realities of studying in Nigeria while 15 reported a mismatch between their expectations and realities. Hence, three themes – met expectations, unmet expectations and recommendations from the international students – emanated from this study, as subsequently discussed.

Met expectations

Twenty-five per cent of the participants at the two universities indicated that their expectations prior to studying in Nigeria matched the actual realities. These students appraised their decision to study in Nigeria as satisfactory. One of the most prevalent expectations was an improvement in their English language skills. However, this expectation was peculiar to the French-speaking international students at UI, who in addition to obtaining a degree in Nigeria hoped to acquire English language proficiency. For example, Participant S3 from Cote d'Ivoire, a French-speaking country, relayed his expectation as follows: "I was expecting that on getting to Nigeria, I should get my PhD and also be able to speak fluently in English." At the time of conducting this interview, he was happy that his expectation had generally been met, indicating that, "… even though my English is not perfect but I can at least communicate". This expectation regarding language was corroborated by Participant S4 from Benin Republic, another French-speaking country, who said, "I am in Nigeria because I want to improve my English. Before coming, I could not speak English at all, I learnt it here in Nigeria". When asked if her expectation was met she responded, "I am experiencing what I expected". In addition, the students in this study were happy with the higher standard of education in Nigeria than in their home countries. For example, Participant S10 from Western Sahara stated:

> In terms of academics, research and ranking, the University of Ibadan is better than all the universities in my country. So, I was happy before even coming here and I saw what I was expecting in terms of the level of education, lecturers and the environment.

Similarly, Participant S7 from Mali mentioned that he did not have adequate knowledge of the academics at UI prior to studying in Nigeria, but that he expected a good standard of education at least. He was subsequently impressed by the quality of education and research offered at UI:

> When I came, one of the things I discovered was that Nigeria was far ahead of Mali and other West African countries in terms of academics, research, scientific research and other things.

The participants at CU also attested to the quality of education offered by the university. For instance, Participant S20, prior to arriving in Nigeria, knew that he would be attending a university that places a premium on spirituality, and so he was expecting to benefit spiritually from his affiliation to CU and at the same time excel academically. Comparing the standard of education in his home country to that at CU, he admitted that CU was of a higher standard than universities in Togo.

> We don't have this kind of standard university in Togo, even the private universities there cannot match up with Covenant University.

Unmet expectations

Seventy-five per cent of the interview participants at the two universities indicated that their expectations prior to studying in Nigeria did not match the actual reality.

One area of unmet expectations that stands out from the responses of participants at both universities was the lack of teaching and learning resources, infrastructure and technology. According to the participants at UI, they had expected the university, with its claim to be "the first and the best", to be better equipped with the resources and technology needed for their respective courses. Similarly, the international students at CU were disappointed that the university was not aware of advances in certain resources and technology, in spite of its 'Vision 10:2022' to become one of the top ten universities in the world by the year 2022. This unmet expectation is articulated thus by Participant S3:

> One thing I do not like about UI is the lack of resources for my course. As a geographer, I need to use some software like GIS and laboratory equipment but there is nothing in the lab even though I paid for it.

Participant S4 from Zambia expressed the same sentiment:

> I expected high standards of learning in terms of good infrastructure, learning, technology and a conducive environment for me to learn in.

Another aspect of unmet expectations was the academic demands in Nigeria. The participants at CU in particular complained of a heavy academic workload which hampered other aspects of their student life. A review of the CU student handbook (pp. 6-8) indicates that the university places a premium on the "The Total Man Concept" which takes students through various rigorous programmes (academically, spiritually, entrepreneurially etc.). This disappointment was exemplified by Participant S12 from Cameroon, who was not expecting the heavy academic workload she had to deal with:

> I got to meet a system that is purely academic, something I will refer to as a high school in my home country. I felt like I was taking a step back in time, going back to what I did in high school … the academic pressure is really much.

To get a clear sense of the academic workload in Nigeria, Participant S16 from South Africa explained that university students in her country usually do eight modules or courses per semester, attending only four in each semester. Participant S14 reiterated how stressful the academic workload in Nigeria could be by explaining that his friend from his home country, Zambia, who was studying the same programme in China, only had to do five courses in a semester while he (Participant S14) did 14. These students also mentioned that they had too many classes to attend in a day, which prevented them from having free time to spend on other activities.

Apart from being disappointed with the large amount of academic work they had to deal with, the international students were also not happy with the universities' integration efforts. When asked whether her expectations matched reality, Participant S16 from South

Africa stated: "I had thought that I would feel more welcomed and I didn't. I still don't". She explained that she had had a difficult transition which made her very unhappy, and she was longing to go home. Her feelings were echoed by Participant S13, who said:

> Once the university knows that an international student is coming in, an orientation should be organised for that student. I never had such orientation.

The international students at UI, on the other hand, felt more welcomed than their CU counterparts. However, a few of them also mentioned they did not receive proper orientation to aid their integration and found it difficult settling into their host institution. For example, when asked whether his expectations were met with regard to feeling welcomed and well-integrated, Participant S1 replied:

> No, I am a man, and I won't lie to you. The integration will be easy if someone can help you. They [university staff and local students] are not helpful.

The responses elicited from the international students at UI indicated that those from francophone countries had a more difficult transition. They were disappointed with the absence of well-structured English classes to help French-speaking students adjust. The admission policy of the two universities states that "a credit pass in English language is compulsory for all courses" (The University of Ibadan Calendar, 2018, p. 2; Covenant University student handbook, 2019-2022, p. 54), but it is not clear whether international students are exempt from this requirement.

Recommendations from the International Students

The international students made salient recommendations on how their universities could bridge the gap between their expectations before studying in Nigeria and the realities they encountered. They believe that these recommendations could assist international students to transition smoothly into the host country and the host institution. Several recommendations were made but we elaborate only on the two most commonly mentioned. First, the participants at the two universities longed for an appreciable level of assistance from the universities, which they believed would go a long way in assisting their transition. Participant S10 from Western Sahara succinctly stated:

> An international student expects some level of assistance to be well integrated into the university system and might be frustrated if there is no assistance. Such student will be eager to return to their country.

If international students lack the right support from the university it can lead to a difficult transition. As Participant S19 said:

> The university should be more interested in international students, which is something that is really lacking when we were transitioning … They did not really show interest in us. If the university showed us care, our transition would be quite easier.

When asked about the specifics of assistance the international students expected from the university, accommodation topped the list for participants at both universities. The students expected their accommodation to be a priority for university authorities, in view of the amount they paid in fees compared to local students. Another area of assistance was with the registration process; the participants relayed how daunting the largely manual registration process was. They also believed that orientation and follow-up from the university would add to their experience. The international students at CU also expected to receive some level of assistance from the university with regard to visa processes.

Second, the participants recommended that the universities provide adequate online information to provide prospective international students with a better sense of what to expect in the host country and at the institution. Having an idea of the rules and regulations in the host institution and the challenges they might face would have enabled them to come prepared and alleviated their shock upon arrival. For example, one of the rules in the CU student handbook (p. 67) states: "No student is allowed to possess or use mobile phones or any other gadgets or devices that are capable of placing and receiving calls on campus within or outside the Halls of Residence. MDA/PDA devices with sims are not allowed for use in the University".

The handbook also stipulates that students could make use of the university telephone services located within and outside the halls of residence. However, the students claimed that such vital information was missing from the university's website and was not communicated to them by the Office of International Linkages (OIP) prior to leaving their home countries, thus leading to international students being caught unawares upon arrival. Expressing her disappointment while also making recommendations, Participant S12 from Cameroon explicitly stated:

> I would like that administrators see to it that the online information about the university is authentic and detailed. Before students leave their countries to come here, they should have a good idea of what they will need and what they will see, so that we are able to adjust well. The International Office and Linkages should be available to communicate with international students while they are still home, so that they can come here ready … Particularly in Covenant University, it should be clearly stated on the online platform, for example, that students are not allowed to communicate with a phone when they get here.

Similarly, the international students at UI pointed out the importance of information for their transition experience. For example, they would not have been so shocked by the erratic power supply in Nigeria if they had been informed about the issue before arriving. Participant S8 from Mali mentioned:

> The first thing [recommendation] is light, we don't have light. If someone had told me before coming that there is no constant power supply in Nigeria, I would have doubted it.

The international students at UI did not take the issue of electricity lightly, especially because they were postgraduate students engaged in research that was time-sensitive and they needed to work on their computers. Moreover, considering that the UI participants

were on scholarships, they viewed the intermittent power supply as an impediment to completing their studies within the time stipulated by their scholarship conditions. Participant S7 therefore recommended that "they [the university] can provide generator in a special hostel for international students and include it in the bill".

Other recommendations made by the international students included an avenue for international students to be recognized at the university such as the establishment of an "international students' day". They also recommended a well-structured English language programme for students whose first language is not English.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight that international students have a number of expectations of their study experience prior to leaving their home countries. Positive or negative transition experiences of international students depend on their met or unmet expectations, which Schlossberg (2011) refers to as an anticipated transition. Schulmann and Choudaha (2014) argue that a relationship exists between students' expectations of their host institutions and the realities they experience, which consequently determine their transition process. In line with O'Neil and Palmer (2004), international students regard studying abroad as an investment and thus compare their expectations with actual reality to determine the success of this venture.

Based on the findings of this study, academic experience is one of the most important factors in the overall experiences of international students. Marei (2018) and Wadhwa (2016) note that acquiring quality higher education and exposure to high standards of teaching and learning infrastructure are some expectations that serve as motivations for international study. As the participants mentioned, the quality of education in Nigeria is of a high standard. Indeed, UI and CU have taken the lead among Nigerian universities in the global rankings. International students at these two universities therefore expected a high academic standard, which they largely experienced in reality. That notwithstanding, the findings reveal that both universities are underequipped in terms of teaching and learning resources and infrastructure. Funding in the Nigerian higher education sector has been a major problem over the years and is felt not only felt by students in the lack of teaching and learning resources and deteriorating facilities, but also by academic and non-academic staff who often embark on strike action to protest poor renumeration and poor working conditions. Private universities like CU generate their own funds but international students still expected better quality resources and infrastructure. Many of the students at CU also decried the hectic academic workload with which they were saddled. Although it is explicitly stated in the students' handbook that CU is rigorous academically and otherwise, international students were not aware of this until they began their studies.

Common responses gathered from the interview participants at both universities clearly indicate the lack of integration and assistance offered to international students by the universities. These issues were prevalent in participants' experiences and in their recommendations. Many of them did not get the kind of support they had expected to allow them to transition seamlessly. Loneliness and isolation ranked as the two most

common integration issues, like the experiences of African undergraduate students at an American university reported in Constantine et al. (2004). Similarly, international students in popular destination countries such as the UK (Taylor & Ali, 2017), the US (Zhang, 2016), Australia (Ashton-Hay, 2016), Canada (Guo & Guo, 2017) and South Africa (Ratshilaya, 2017) reportedly experience some level of integration difficulty. The importance of support for international students has been substantially indicated in several studies on international students' experiences. For example, Lee et al. (2018) recommended visa assistance for the international students in their South African study. Adediran (2017) argues that accommodation assistance and various socio-cultural integration programmes should be included in the support system a host institution renders to its international students. It is important that universities the world over pay attention to the integration of international students and offer them the necessary support to alleviate their stress (Sengupta, 2015). Moreover, universities must guard against international students feeling short-changed by receiving far less assistance than is commensurate with the high tuition fees they pay.

The importance of a reliable information system cannot be overemphasised in bridging the gap between international students' expectations and their actual realities. According to Yee (2014), providing international students with adequate information is one of the ways of managing the transition challenges. As Martinez and Colaner (2017) argue, the availability of information prepares students and guards against negative experiences. Much of the frustration experienced by international students could be avoided if they received adequate information prior to departure from their home countries. This is the responsibility of universities' international offices which should ensure that every international student is well informed about the host country and the host institution. International students also rely on information on universities' websites; hence these websites should provide specific information for international students in addition to general information for all students. For example, to combat the socio-cultural issues faced by students, the University of Queensland in Australia includes certain practical information in their orientation sessions, such as how to open a bank account (Barron et al., 2009). Universities should not only provide information pre-departure (Guo & Guo, 2017) but should also provide orientation for all international students on arrival to ensure their smooth transition and then continue to provide follow-up support as they progress through their studies (Barron et al., 2009).

At the time of writing this article, the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a "new-normal" of virtual learning in higher education, following the closure of most campuses around the world. Since the outbreak of the global pandemic, concerns over the sustainability of inbound and outbound academic student mobility have been widely expressed (Rumbley, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Wang, 2020). Nevertheless, international academic mobility and studies like our own will remain relevant as students who seek international education will prefer to physically cross borders than engage in online education. Such students will continue to have expectations and host institutions need to ensure that they prepare adequately to meet their needs. It is clear that the internationalization of higher education entails more than merely recruiting international

students to a higher institution of learning; it encompasses meeting their expectations, as much as possible, and ensuring their overall positive experience.

Statement about Research Ethics and Potential Conflict of Interest

We, the authors, confirm the originality of this article as it has not been published elsewhere, nor is it being considered for publication in another journal. We also disclose that there is no conflict of interest of any sort. Where the work of others has been used, sources have been identified and duly acknowledged by means of in-text citations and complete references.

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