

PROMOTING INCLUSIVENESS IN THE NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PHD STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) constitute essential pillars for sustainable innovation in the Nigerian higher education system. Accordingly, this study investigated the lived experiences of Office Technology and Management (OTM) teaching staff undertaking doctoral studies at a private university in Ibadan, Nigeria, through a qualitative research approach involving in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit Office Technology and Management (OTM) teaching staff from polytechnics who were undertaking their PhD programmes at a private university. Four overarching themes emerged from the findings: previous experience syndrome, professional striving, organisational barriers, and personal barriers. The findings revealed that prioritising inclusivity enables institutions to empower PhD students to develop sustainable and innovative approaches to managing information and office environments. Accordingly, the study recommends that academic institutions invest in research capacity development and provide targeted mentorship programmes, both of which are critical for promoting sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Doctoral Journey, Office technology & management staff, Inclusiveness, Nigerian higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

To attain true educational achievement, it is important to commit to equality, diversity, and inclusiveness, providing a solid foundation for a fulfilling and motivating educational experience [1]. Nonetheless, a key element of any progressive university is its commitment to equality and inclusiveness, which paves the way for these institutions to balance operational management with strategic planning, fostering a culture that is both collaborative and innovative [2, 3]. It is important to note that equality involves granting everyone the same opportunities, resources, and rights,

irrespective of their background, to enable them to reach their full potential [4]. In higher education, equality can be defined as providing everyone enrolled with equal chances, justice, and possibilities regardless of their sexuality, gender, race, disability, or religion. It usually contains details about the rules, practices, and challenges involved in attaining this goal in higher education. Similar to the principle of equality, inclusivity within this context refers to a multifaceted and ongoing process aimed at enhancing the capacity of the education system to effectively respond to the needs of all learners. It involves not only expanding access but also intentionally designing and sustaining educational environments in which diversity is recognised, respected, and valued [5]. Within such an environment, individuals from varied backgrounds are equitable in educational experiences. Inclusivity seeks to dismantle patterns of exclusion that may arise from discriminatory attitudes, structural barriers, and insufficient institutional responses to diversity across dimensions. Therefore, higher education institutions must be inclusive to achieve social fairness, provide high-quality education for all students, and foster lifelong learning. Office Technology and Management (OTM) emerges as a crucial discipline in the pursuit of academic excellence, offering fundamental competencies, technological proficiency, and managerial skills that greatly improve students' capacity for effective and efficient learning, organisation, and professional development within modern educational environments [6]. The philosophies of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are very necessary for fostering an environment that provides credence to several perspectives and groundbreaking results in the world of OTM [1]. The giant steps taken by academic institutions towards sustainability are vital in grasping how the philosophies are executed and felt by anyone who is desirous of studying to acquire higher degrees [6]. PhD students are expected to be well-grounded in research and innovation, and their acquired knowledge should offer a treasured understanding of the usefulness of current policies and practices related to equality and inclusivity. In the context of OTM, the study of equality and inclusivity today is, without doubt, appropriate because of the relevance of data and information in propelling decision-making processes across various sectors. By examining the lived experiences of PhD students, it is easy to ascertain systemic issues and evolve methods to create an all-encompassing and impartial academic environment. Encouraging and buttressing talent from diverse backgrounds can enhance the overall sustainability of the field [7, 8]. Additionally, bearing in mind factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity is indispensable in the understanding of the complex nature of equality and inclusivity. If the issues are carefully addressed, there will be a reasonable contribution to the development of more effective and holistic policies that stimulate a sustainable future in academia [9, 10]. Guided by the research questions outlined below, this study sought to explore in depth the lived experiences of the OTM PhD students while also critically examining the systemic and institutional barriers they may encounter within the context of a private university in Ibadan, Southwestern Nigeria.

1. What are the current perceptions and experiences of equality and inclusivity among OTM PhD students in private universities in Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria?
2. What systemic obstacles hinder equality and inclusivity for OTM PhD students in private universities in Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The League of European Research Universities highlights that examining inequality and lack of inclusivity involves navigating complex, interconnected dimensions that intersect with structural barriers to social and economic opportunities [11]. Mentorship programmes at various academic levels reveal how identity markers like race, ethnicity, class, and gender influence implicit biases among institutional agents, affecting perceptions of underrepresented teachers. These biases contribute to negative experiences for underrepresented faculty and students, impacting their roles and research. A researcher discovered that inclusiveness in Nigerian higher education depends on curriculum design, pedagogy, and student evaluation [5]. The importance of teachers in achieving

success in inclusive education cannot be overemphasised. There is a need for teaching and learning activities at the postgraduate level to lay more emphasis on equity, inclusion, and diversity in order to instill inclusiveness practices in graduate learners [12].

In addition, it was noted that while Nigerian policies aim for equality and inclusivity in university education, weak implementation results in only 36% of applicants being admitted [13]. Scholars identified bias and micro aggressiveness as challenges for MD-PhD trainees, suggesting targeted interventions to support their professional identity formation [14]. Equality and equivalence are critically germane to postgraduate programmes, especially the professional doctorate programmes which are the zenith of academic certification and best practice in terms of high-quality teaching and learning experiences; the difference between academic and professional PhD programmes is core [15]. It was found that universities offering graduate programmes is in dire need of coordination and interaction tailored to strategic stated objectives and effective communications, as these elements will help achieve success in sustainability practices [16].

2.1. Agenda for Sustainable Development

Sustainability is characterised as a framework that harmonises environmental, social, and economic factors to enhance quality of life [17]. In higher education, sustainability agendas are shaped by international conventions and agreements, such as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD 2005-2014), Education for All (EFA) Dakar Framework (2000-2014), and the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals [18, 19]. These frameworks aim to combat inequality and emphasise the role of educational stakeholders in addressing common challenges to achieve a sustainable future.

Higher education institutions must ensure high-quality education is accessible to all, including people with disabilities, who often face significant disadvantages globally. Addressing these issues requires reorienting the higher education system to increase public awareness and understanding of sustainability. Universities can achieve excellence in teaching, research, and innovation by developing inclusive programmes and integrating them into the curriculum. Enhancing equality, diversity, and inclusion will strengthen the academic community, fostering a sense of belonging and improving dedication and output, thereby ensuring long-term relevance and expanding global impact.

To build an equal, diverse, and inclusive university system, institutions should monitor and measure current conditions and the impact of new programmes, listen to underrepresented groups in a safe and respectful environment, and complement data with personal experiences. Developing a formal strategy and a holistic, synergistic approach to addressing inequality and lack of inclusion is key to creating a sustainable university culture.

2.2. The Role of Inclusiveness in Sustaining the OTM Programme

Universities will be better equipped to attain internationally relevant excellence in teaching, research, and innovation by developing inclusive research and innovation programmes and completely integrating these principles into the curriculum [20]. Additionally, increased equality, diversity, and inclusion will strengthen the academic community by giving its stakeholders a greater sense of belonging, which is likely to improve dedication and output as well as guarantee their long-term relevance and expand their already significant global impact [21]. The aforementioned can be accomplished by putting in place procedures to ensure equal, inclusive and a diverse system by tracking and appraising the current system in operation [22]. Equality and inclusiveness can be achieved for doctoral programmes if those at the helm of affairs adopt active

listening to the lived experience of those from underserved populations and underrepresented fields in a non-judgmental environment and show empathy. Furthermore, adopting a formal strategy as well as a holistic and long-term approach to inequality and lack of inclusion in university culture can ensure tailored solutions that address various situations and groups [23].

One major obstacle to lasting changes for postgraduate students and underrepresented faculty is the tendency of colleges and universities to undertake multiple projects simultaneously. Cultural resistance to change and a lack of understanding at various institutional levels also hinder equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Individuals may struggle to express the obstacles they face, and modern discrimination is often not easily recognised. Supervisory challenges, faculty mentoring issues, financial pressures, and personal characteristics (e.g., social class, no class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, cultural background, age, or disability) further impede progress.

A lack of awareness about discrimination and insufficient empathy for those experiencing prejudice can hinder equality and inclusion. The norm group may not know what problems underprivileged groups face, which makes it challenging to make changes. However, data and institutional reviews can enhance our understanding of these issues. Raising awareness about the difficulties faced by underrepresented groups can help address inequities and performance disparities. University leaders must familiarise themselves with empirical data on structural inequalities and acknowledge biases in university culture. Many universities' reliance on excellence inadvertently excludes or admits different groups based on perceived benefits, posing a challenge to equality and inclusiveness. This misunderstanding can weaken trust in universities' commitments to societal participation and long-term change, and the lack of diversity denies outstanding PhD candidates from underrepresented backgrounds the opportunity to contribute academically, wasting potential creativity.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory of sustainability is a comprehensive strategy that strives towards sustainability in organisations focusing on their economic, social, and environmental dimensions [38]. Introduced by Elkington in 1997, the theory stresses fairness, equality, diversity, and inclusion [39, 40, 41]. The United Nation's 2030 Agenda: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly reinforce these social dimensions, including gender equality, health and well-being, decent work, reducing inequality, infrastructure, climate action, responsible consumption, and partnerships.

Campos-Garcia [42] highlighted the importance of the social aspect of TBL for organisational sustainability, stressing the need for sustainable Human Resources Management (HRM) practices. Higher education institutions ought to promote comprehensive experiential learning for enduring development [43]. This study uses the TBL theory to address systemic challenges and the need for inclusive practices in the OTM profession, aiming to ensure equitable opportunities for PhD students, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, thereby enhancing engagement and retention and fostering a sustainable future.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used an interpretative-qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of OTM PhD students from various universities studying at a private university in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. A purposive homogeneous sampling strategy was adopted, involving seven active OTM teaching staff from the Nigerian polytechnics who are currently undergoing their PhD program at a private university, and they are within the first and fifth

semesters. Two interviews were held: one for first- and second-semester students and another for third- to fifth-semester students. The interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams over two days and recorded. Researchers transcribed the interviews and employed thematic analysis to identify four themes. Ethical approval and participant consent were obtained before data collection. The researchers explained the purpose of carrying out the research to all participants and assured them of confidentiality with the obtained data.

4. RESULTS

A thorough manual coding process was applied to the gathered data; this includes the researchers getting familiar with the coding processes and generating patterns as well as associating them with the discussed issues. To derive meaning from the gathered data, conversations were recorded and played several times, guided by the research questions that the study sought to answer [24]. This process allows the researchers to understand the data for the sorting of codes and classification of patterns line by line using direct quotations from the participants. After this stage, the generated codes were interpreted and classified into four pronounced themes: Previous Experience Syndrome, Professional Striving, Organizational-Based Barriers, and Personal-Based Barriers. Following their extraction from the interview transcript, these thematic patterns underwent extensive classification and thematic analysis to guarantee the data dependability and correctness.

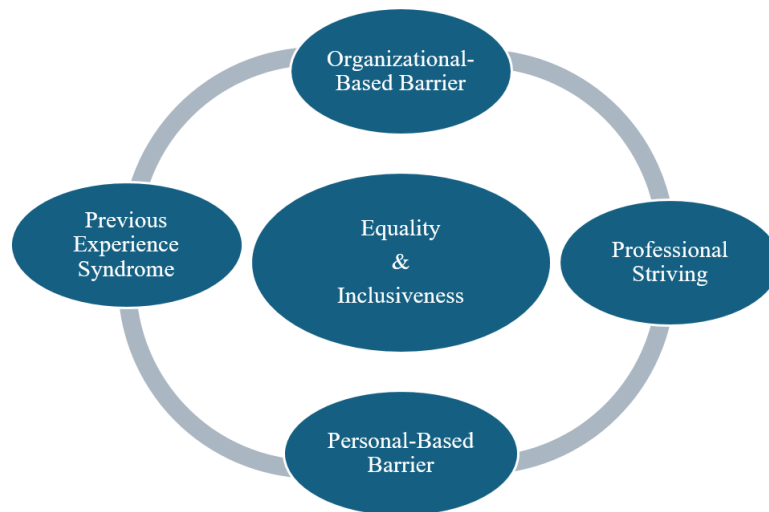


Figure 1: Equality and Inclusiveness Thematic Map for OTM PhD Students
Researchers' Compilation, 2025

The research explored the lived experiences of OTM PhD students as indicators for a sustainable future private university in Ibadan, Nigeria. The analysis identified four main themes: Previous Experience Syndrome, Professional Striving, Organizational-Based, and Personal-Based barriers. These themes offer insights into the students' perceptions and concerns regarding equality and inclusiveness in their profession.

4.1. Previous Experience Syndrome

The first theme, "Previous Experience Syndrome," highlights the importance of equality and inclusiveness in the PhD journey. Based on respondents' stories, three sub-themes emerged: continuous smooth relationship, reduced attention and guidance, and solitary journey. Five out of seven participants completed their MSc at the same university and anticipated comparable

mentoring during their PhD. P1 noted, “When I enrolled for my MSc programme at the same university, the experience was much better in terms of mentoring, teaching, and coaching.” P2 added, “I also enjoyed the positive relationship between students and lecturers, which helped me to finish my master’s.” However, participants perceived a lack of guidance or mentorship during their PhD journey.

Reduced Attention and Guidance: Participants experienced less attention and guidance as they progressed. P2 stated, “I don’t have any idea of what lies ahead or anyone to explain it to me.” P2 also mentioned, “As I advanced into the PhD programme, I noticed that the level of attention from faculty decreased while I tried to find my feet.” This phenomenon brings attention to the importance of mentors in the OTM field, as P6 emphasized, “We need to be accountable to a mentor who can journey on with us.” While seminars and workshops were beneficial, participants still felt the need for dedicated mentors. **Solitary Journey:** Participants felt lonely during their PhD journey. P4 said, “I felt alone during my PhD, especially when I realized it was something you have to sit down with and do on your own.” P3 echoed, “Now I feel lonely doing my PhD programme.” This highlights the challenge of OTM PhD students having to obtain guidance independently.

4.2. Professional Striving

Another theme from the study is professional striving, which includes the sub-themes of academic pacesetter and inclusivity. While two participants struggled to find their footing, others appreciated the welcoming environment at the university, one of only four offering OTM PhD programmes. P4 noted, “The faculty members are very receptive and accommodating to OTM students in the department, even though they all do not specialize in the programme.” P3 also expressed his appreciation for the university. P2 highlighted the academic benefits, saying, “Doing my PhD has really exposed my knowledge to areas that I have never heard of and made me consult materials in that regard.” The study participant speaks on future opportunities after completion of the programme, with P3 stating, “Due to my background in my discipline, opportunities are waiting for me in the Northern part of Nigeria, and this has positioned me strategically.”

4.3. Organizational-Based Barrier

Two themes emerged regarding inclusiveness and equality in the PhD journey: organizational and personal barriers. These include work overload and lack of qualified professors in the OTM field. Participants expressed challenges in locating mentors owing to the substantial workload of the limited number of available lecturers, resulting in feelings of isolation. P2 noted, “I feel lecturers in the department may be overloaded with work. When you meet a lecturer, they will tell you that they have a lot to do.” P1 highlighted the lack of sufficient qualified professionals as a major problem. P4 added that foreign universities have more tutors for courses, unlike the limited numbers in Nigeria. Another sub-theme is unequal access to resources. Participants, who are academic staff from different institutions, highlighted disparities in resource availability. P5 mentioned, “Some of us don’t have access to the resources our colleagues elsewhere are enjoying.” P5, a lecturer in a private university, noted difficulties in accessing financial aid for their PhD program. P6 expressed feeling disadvantaged compared to peers with access to TETFund opportunities.

4.4. Personal-Based Barrier

Another barrier towards achieving equality and inclusiveness for a sustainable OTM future is the personal-based barrier that emerged as participants continued to share their stories in their PhD

journey. Some participants say the journey has been expensive, even with financial aid from their employers and the government. This issue is illustrated by P3's story: "For me, I am enjoying the sponsorship from the government; however, if I were to sponsor myself, I may not be able to achieve this" (P3). As expressed by P2, who says, 'I am sponsoring myself on my PhD programme and I must say this is a huge task in terms of the financial aspects, but I have no choice right now' (P2). This statement highlighted a significant challenge that may cause some PhD students to discontinue their program midway, as they might struggle to manage the financial commitments associated with it.

4.5. Discussions of Findings

The study investigated the lived experiences of OTM PhD students in a private university in Ibadan, Nigeria, focusing on equity and inclusivity as indicators of a sustainable future. The results showed four themes: previous experience syndrome, professional striving, organizational barriers, and personal barriers. These themes provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences, thoughts, aspirations, and concerns of PhD students.

The previous experience syndrome theme underscores the disparities in expectations and experiences among PhD students who had favorable experiences during their master's degree at the same institution. Prior learning experiences can enhance current learning [25, 26, 27, 28]. Scholars noted that every student has a unique learning experience, while others argued that prior university education can contribute to future educational success [26, 25]. OTM PhD students expected similar positive experiences during their PhD, based on their master's degree experiences. A scholar highlighted the importance of PhD students' expectations in determining program completion or dropout rates [29]. Participants enrolled at the same university where they earned their master's degrees, hoping for a similar positive experience [30]. However, they faced reduced attention and guidance after enrollment. Two participants noted a decline in mentorship during their dissertation phase. A scholar found that supportive activities can enhance learning and reduce stress, while other authors argued that mentees often have unrealistic expectations of mentors [31, 1]. PhD students are often perceived as self-sufficient, but many still struggle to gain their footing. Participants described the PhD program as an isolated endeavor, feeling obligated to acquire knowledge autonomously. Recent research indicates that feelings of loneliness contribute to high turnover rates among PhD students, potentially leading some to abandon their programs [29, 30]. Another central theme identified by participants is professional striving, which includes subthemes of inclusiveness and the emergence of academic pacesetters. Most participants from the Eastern and Northern parts of Nigeria traveled down to the Western part to study the course at the university, as there are not many universities offering the course. Despite this challenge, they found the faculty supportive. As one of the few universities offering OTM PhD programs, students felt included. P4 noted, "The faculty members are very receptive and accommodating to OTM students in the department, even though they all do not specialize in the programme." P3 also expressed his appreciation for the university. Participants also highlighted the benefits of a PhD in OTM. P2 stated, "Doing my PhD has really exposed my knowledge to areas that I have never heard of and made me consult materials in that regard." P3 mentioned future opportunities, saying, "Due to the foundation I had in the university, some opportunities in the North are waiting for me; some universities here in the North are waiting for me to finish the programme."

The second study question identified systemic hurdles to equality and inclusivity for OTM PhD candidates. Emerging themes included organizational and personal barriers. Scholars noted that taking on too much work at once is a barrier [32]. Participants reported that professors' high responsibilities and lack of competent experts in OIM forced them to seek external assistance. Scholars highlighted the persistent shortage of mentors in OTM [1, 33]. The institution needs more

skilled instructors in the OTM discipline [34], [35]. Personal barriers included difficulties in financing PhD programmes for self-funded individuals, an issue highlighted that warrants further investigation [36], [37].

5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

The study investigated the lived experiences of OTM PhD students at a private university in Ibadan, Nigeria, focusing on equality and inclusivity. It explored their unique experiences and identified barriers to a sustainable future for the OTM profession. Four main themes with subthemes were identified. The study concluded that OTM PhD students face challenges that can hinder their goals. However, it also revealed that with supportive networks, equitable resource allocation, and intentional inclusivity, these organizational and societal challenges can be replaced with meaningful contributions arising from enhanced creativity and collaborations.

The study's conclusion suggested the following recommendations to enhance inclusivity for PhD students in the OTM field in Nigeria. First, to strengthen mentorship and guidance for PhD students, management should establish a structured mentorship programme within the profession with dedicated academic advisors to provide continuous guidance and reduce student isolation. Second, the study recommends that management of the institutions should recruit more qualified professionals to ease faculty workload and ensure equal access to financial aid as well as research resources for all PhD students in the OTM field. In addition to these, the government should formulate enabling policies and follow up with adequate implementation of the policies. They should also provide more financial aid in the form of grants and professional development opportunities for those pursuing PhD programmes in higher education. To foster partnerships with global institutions for mentorship, management should encourage joint research and academic exchanges to strengthen the OIM PhD programme. In conclusion, there should be provisions for counseling, stress management workshops, and mental health resources to support PhD students emotionally and psychologically.

5.1. Limitations to the Study

The study's small sample size suggests that future research should include active OTM teaching staff from the Nigerian polytechnics who are undergoing their PhD programme. This would offer a more comprehensive view of experiences from various stakeholders, leading to more generalized findings. In addition, a mixed-method approach to the perceptions of OTM PhD students will generate more innovative ideas.

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