PROMOTING INCLUSIVENESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PHD STUDENTS TOWARDS AASUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) remain vital components to achieving sustainable innovative practices in the Nigerian higher education system. This study explored the lived experiences of the teaching staff in the Office Technology and Management (OTM) department who are currently undergoing doctoral degrees in a private university in Ibadan, Nigeria. A qualitative research approach through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis was adopted for the study. A purposive sampling was also employed to recruit OTM teaching staff in the polytechnics undergoing their PhD programme in a private university. Four broad themes emerged from the findings of the study: previous experience syndrome, professional striving, and organizational and personal barriers. The findings revealed that, by prioritizing inclusivity, institutions can empower PhD students to generate sustainable and innovative solutions for managing information and office environments. Recommendations for academic institutions include funding research competence and offering targeted mentorship programmes, which are very vital for driving sustainability.

Keywords

Doctoral Journey, Office technology & management staff, Sustainability, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion.

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, as well as possibilities regardless of their sexuality, gender, race, handicap, or religion. It usually contains details about the rules, practices, and challenges involved in attaining this goal in higher education. Just like equality, inclusivity encompasses various process of strengthening the

capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners and also ensuring environments where diverse individuals feel valued and can participate fully thus eliminating exclusion that is a consequence of negative attitudes and a lack of response to diversity in race, economic status, social class, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation and ability [5].

Therefore, achieving social fairness, providing high-quality education for all students, and fostering lifelong learning all depend on higher education institutions being inclusive. Office Technology and Management (OTM) emerge as a formidable ally in the pursuit of educational excellence.

Through an effective office technology and management programme, institutions can analyse and optimize administrative processes, enabling an effectively organization of information and streamlined operation [6]. To achieve this, the paper was divided into five sections: the rationale for the study, the literature review, methodology, thematic analysis, Results, and discussion of findings. The final part discusses the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

1.1. Study Rationale

The philosophies of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are very necessary for fostering an environment that gives credence to several perspectives and ground-breaking results, in the world of OTM. The giant steps taken by academic institutions towards sustainability is 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 into 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. The overall sustainability of the field can be enhanced by making sure that ability from several backgrounds is stimulated and buttressed [7; 8]. Besides, bearing in mind factors such as socioeconomic, gender, and ethnicity status is indispensable in the understanding of the complex nature of equality and inclusivity. If the issues are carefully addressed, there will be reasonable contribution to the development of more effective and holistic policies that stimulates a sustainable future in academia [9;10]. Hence, the study sought to explore the lived experiences of OTM PhD students and to identify the systemic barriers they may face in a private university in Ibadan, Southwest, Nigeria guided by the following research questions.

Research Questions

✧ What are the current perceptions and experiences of equality and inclusivity among OTM PhD students in private universities in Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria?
✧ What are the systemic barriers militating against equality and inclusivity for OTM PhD students in private universities in Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The League of European Research Universities [11]highlights that examining inequality and lack of inclusivity involves navigating complex, interconnected dimensions that intersect with structural barriers to social and economic opportunities. Mentorship programs 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. [5] found that inclusivity in Nigerian higher education relies on curriculum design, pedagogy, and student assessment. Teachers play a crucial role in achieving positive outcomes in inclusive education. [12] emphasized the need for postgraduate teachers to advocate for equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) to produce graduates who promote inclusive practices.

In addition, [13] noted that while Nigerian policies aim for equality and inclusivity in university education, weak implementation results in only 36% of applicants being admitted. [14] identified bias and micro-aggressions as challenges for MD-PhD trainees, suggesting targeted interventions to support their professional identity formation. McSherry and Bettany-Saltikov (2014) stressed the importance of equality and equivalence in Professional Doctorate programs, ensuring high-quality learning experiences and recognizing differences between PhD and professional doctorate programs. [16] found that sustainability practices in universities need coordination and integration according to strategic goals, with effective communication being crucial for success

2.1. Agenda for Sustainable Development

[17] describe sustainability as a paradigm that balances environmental, societal, and economic considerations to improve quality of life. In higher education, sustainability agendas are shaped by international conventions and agreements, such as the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD 2005-14), Education for All (EFA) Dakar Framework (2000-2014), and the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals [18; 19]. These frameworks aim to combat inequality and emphasize 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 programs 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 programs, 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 essential for fostering a sustainable university culture.

2.2. The Role of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Towards a Sustainable Future in the OTM Programme

Universities will be better equipped to attain internationally relevant excellence in teaching, research, and innovation by developing inclusive research and innovation programs and completely integrating them 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]. All of these can be

achieved by establishing important steps to build an equal, inclusive and adiverseuniversity system through tracking and assessing the current situation introduced to bring about it [22]. By being open and listening to experiences shared by the underrepresented in a safe and respectful environment and providing the critical human dimension to complement the monitoring data and enrich the narrative equality and inclusiveness for PhD experience can be achieved. Furthermore, adopting a formal strategy as well as a holisticand along-term approach to inequality and lack of inclusion in university culture can ensure tailored solutions that address a variety of situations and groups [23].

One major obstacle to lasting changes for postgraduate students and under-represented 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 recognized. Supervisory challenges, faculty mentoring issues, financial pressures, and personal characteristics (e.g., social 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 lack knowledge of the challenges faced by underprivileged groups, making change difficult. However, these issues can be better understood through data and institutional reviews. Raising awareness about the difficulties faced by underrepresented groups can help address inequities and performance disparities. University leaders must familiarize 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 under-represented backgrounds the opportunity to contribute academically, wasting potential creativity

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 programme in a private university, and they are within the first and fifth semesters. Two interview sessions were conducted: one for those in their third to sixth semesters and another for those in their first to second semesters, ensuring participants were in similar stages of their studies. 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.

4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A thorough manual coding process was applied to the gathered data, this includes the researchers getting familiar with the coding processes, generating patters as well as associating them to the discussed issues. To comprehend the gathered data, the recorded conversations were read repeatedly guided by the study objectives and research questions [24]. This process allows the

researchers to understand the data for sorting of codes and classifications 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 and Personal-Based barriers. Following their extraction from the interview transcript, these thematic patterns underwent extensive classification and thematic analysis to guarantee the data's dependability and correctness.
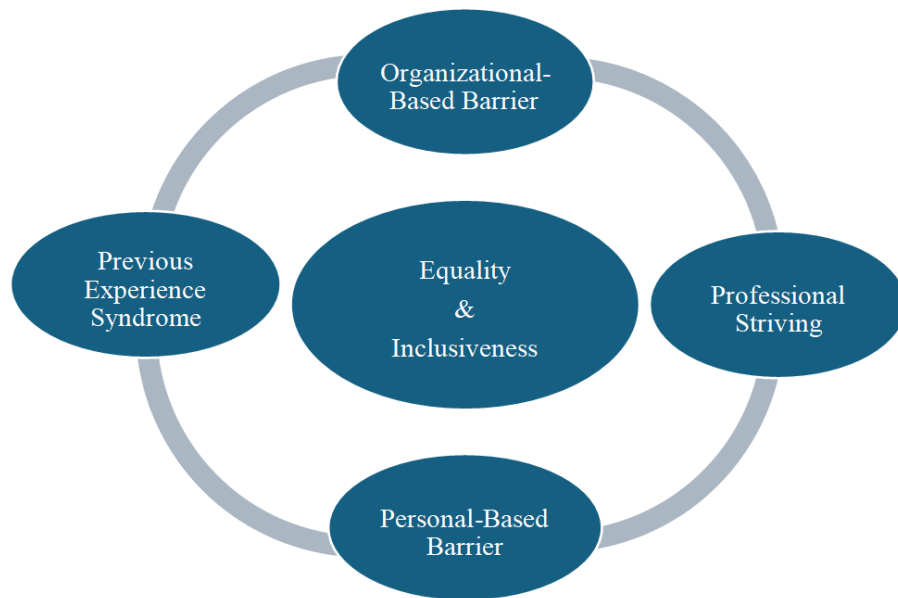

Figure 1: Equality and Inclusiveness Thematic Map for OTM PhD Students Researchers' Compilation, 2025

4.1. Results

The research aims to explore 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.

4.2. 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. Continuous Smooth

Relationship: Five out of seven participants completed their MSc at the same university and expected similar 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 good relationship of student and lecturers

which helped me to finish my master's." However, participants felt they were left to navigate their PhD without guidance or mentorship.

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 and anyone to explain to me." P2 also mentioned, "As I advanced into the PhD program, I noticed that the level of attention from faculty decreased while I tried to find my feet." This highlights the need for mentors in the OTM field, as P6 emphasized, "We need to be accountable to a mentor who can journey on with us." Solitary Journey: Participants felt lonely during their PhD journey. P4 said, "I felt alone during 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 PhD students having to find guidance independently

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4.3. Professional Striving

Another theme from the study is professional striving, with 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 programs. 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 added, "I give a thumbs up to 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." Participants also noted future opportunities, with P3 stating, "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."

4.4. Organizational-Based Barrier

Two themes emerged regarding inclusiveness and equality in the PhD journey: organizational and personal barriers. These include work overload and a lack of qualified professors in the OTM field. Participants shared difficulties in finding mentors due to the heavy workload on the few available lecturers, leading to feelings of loneliness. 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 number 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 TET fund opportunities.

4.5. Personal-Based Barrier

Another barrier towards achieving an equality and inclusiveness for a sustainable OTM future is the personal-based barrier that emerged as participants continue to share their stories in their PhD journey. Although some participants enjoyed financial supports from their various employers and government, however, some have pointed out that the journey has been expensive for them to run. This can be seen from the story shared by P3 that 'For me I am enjoying the sponsorship from the government however, if I am 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 revealed one of the hurdles and reasons why some PhD students may stop the programme halfway as they may not be able to bear the financial commitments that comes with it.

5. DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The study investigated the lived experiences of OTM PhD students in private universities in Ibadan, Nigeria, focusing on equity and inclusivity as indicators of a sustainable future. The findings revealed four themes: previous experience syndrome, professional striving, organizational barriers, and personal barriers, providing a multidimensional view of PhD experiences, perceptions, aspirations, and concerns.

Previous experience syndrome theme highlights differences in expectations and experiences of PhD students who had positive experiences during their master's degree at the same university. Prior learning experiences can enhance current learning [25; 26; 27; 28]. [26]noted that every student has a unique learning experience, while [25] argued that prior university education can contribute to future educational success. OTM PhD students expected similar positive experiences during their PhD, based on their master's degree experiences. [29] highlighted the importance of PhD students' expectations in determining program completion or dropout rates. 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 enrolment. Two participants noted a decline in mentorship during their dissertation phase. [31] found that supportive activities can enhance learning and reduce stress, while [1] argued that mentees often have unrealistic expectations of mentors. PhD students are often perceived as self-sufficient, but many still struggle to find their footing. Participants described the PhD program as a lonely journey, feeling left to learn on their own. Recent research indicates that feelings of loneliness contribute to high turnover rates among PhD students [29;30], potentially leading some to abandon their programs

Another central theme is professional striving, with sub-themes of inclusiveness and emerging academic pacesetter. Participants from the Northern and Eastern parts of the country travel long distances to attend the university. 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 added, "I give a thumbs up to 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. [32] noted that taking on too much work at once is a barrier. Participants reported that professors' high responsibilities and a lack of competent experts in OIM forced them to seek external assistance. [1] and [33] highlighted the persistent shortage of mentors in OTM. The institution needs more skilled instructors in the OTM discipline [34; 35]. Personal barriers included difficulties in financing PhD programs for self-funded individuals. This issue, highlighted by [36] and [37] while it requires further investigation.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

6.1. Triple Bottom Line Theory of Sustainability

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory of Sustainability, introduced by Elkington in 1997, provides a comprehensive strategy for sustainability in organizations, focusing on economic, social, and environmental dimensions [38]. The theory emphasizes equality, inclusivity, fairness, and diversity [37;41; 39]. The UN's 2030 Agenda, known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reinforces these social dimensions, including health and well-being, gender equality, decent work, infrastructure, reducing inequality, responsible consumption, climate action, and partnerships.

[42] highlighted the importance of the social aspect of TBL for organizational sustainability, stressing the need for sustainable Human Resources Management (HRM) practices. [43] argued that higher education institutions should facilitate holistic experiential learning for sustainable growth. 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, retention, and fostering a sustainable future.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were suggested to further promote sustainable future for PhD students in the OTM field. 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 is important. 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. Furthermore, there should be implementation of policies that provides financial aids in form of grants, and professional development opportunities for those pursuing PhD programmes. 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 provision for counselling, stress management workshops, and mental health resources to support PhD students emotionally and psychologically.

8. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate 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 sub-themes were identified. The study concluded that OTM PhD students face challenges that can

hinder their goals. However, supportive networks, equitable resource allocation, and intentional inclusivity enhance creativity and collaboration, enabling meaningful contributions to organizational and societal challenges.

9. LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

The study's small sample size suggests that future research should include OTM PhD candidates from both private and public institutions in Nigeria for a broader perspective. 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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