

Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Diaspora: Postgraduate Students' Perspectives in the Education Sector

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Abstract

Postdoctoral fellowships are essential for academic advancement, particularly among the African diasporas scholars of African heritage have profoundly impacted research and teaching across the continent. However, in Nigeria, the rigorous nature of doctoral studies often deters PhD graduates from pursuing postdoctoral opportunities, limiting their global research engagement and interdisciplinary collaborations. International postdoctoral studies offer networking, interdisciplinary experience, and academic growth, enriching scholars' perspectives and fostering innovation. Despite these benefits, Nigerian postgraduate students' perceptions of postdoctoral studies remain underexplored. This qualitative study examines postgraduate students' views on pursuing postdoctoral fellowships abroad. Ten students from public universities in Oyo State, Nigeria, were purposively selected. Findings show that while students recognize the benefits, enhanced research skills, funding, and collaborations, barriers such as limited information, financial constraints, institutional restrictions, and job security concerns hinder participation. The study calls for policy support and awareness campaigns to facilitate postdoctoral transitions.

Keywords: postdoctoral fellowship, African diaspora, postgraduate students, higher education

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Introduction

Many researchers have documented postdoctoral fellowship's positive impacts on diaspora academia (Echono, 2023; Kahn & MacGarvie, 2024; Mwampanba et al., 2022; Teferra, 2021). Academics in the African diaspora have contributed immensely to academic development at the continental level. Because of the arduous and strenuous challenges of doctoral studies, most PhD holders in Africa, especially in Nigeria hardly venture into the postdoctoral programmes in Diaspora. Acquiring skills and international experiences during postdoctoral studies break new ground and provides room for research Doctoral specialization. Doctoral graduates must venture into postdoctoral studies in the diaspora as this will avail the opportunity for international experiences such as collaborative work, enhanced research ability in international perspectives in another field and provide an opportunity for international influence.

However, acquiring advanced research skills and international exposure during postdoctoral studies presents invaluable opportunities for academic and professional growth. Engaging in postdoctoral training abroad allows doctoral graduates to specialize further in their fields, gain cutting-edge research experience and develop expertise in emerging areas of study. Furthermore, participation in international postdoctoral programs fosters cross-border collaborations, enhances research capacity, and broadens scholars' perspectives by exposing them to diverse methodologies, academic cultures, and multidisciplinary approaches.

African doctoral graduates must proactively pursue opportunities to participate in global research networks to optimize the advantages of postdoctoral study. Pursuing postdoctoral studies abroad offers scholars a distinctive opportunity to engage in international collaborations, enhance their research output, and elevate their academic prominence. Furthermore, international experience and exposure gained during PDF training, to other academic settings improves their teaching, mentoring, and leadership abilities, thereby equipping them for significant contributions upon returning to their home institutions (Karakaş, 2020; Rotstein, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

Many doctorate holders in Nigeria are hardly interested in furthering their research careers by entering into postdoctoral fellowships. Evidence revealed that many doctoral students felt depleted by the rigours of their doctoral studies and were not inclined to pursue further studies. This denies them the many opportunities within postdoctoral studies. Therefore, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between factors that limit interest in doing postdoctoral studies and the benefits to be gained from a fellowship programme. This research work thus investigates Nigeria postgraduate students' perspectives on postdoctoral fellowships in diaspora.

Purpose of the Study

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the attitude of Nigeria postgraduate students on doing postdoctoral fellowships in diaspora and the specific objectives are to:

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate postgraduate students' perspectives on postdoctoral fellowship in the diaspora, in Oyo State. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- 1) Examine postgraduate student understanding of the meaning of doing postdoctoral research in Oyo State, Nigeria.
- 2) Assess postgraduate students' intentions to obtain postdoctoral fellowships in the diaspora.
- 3) Illuminate the benefits attached to postdoctoral fellowships in the diaspora for the postgraduate students of Oyo State, Nigeria.
- 4) Evaluate postgraduate students' perceived challenges of doing postgraduate studies in diaspora.
- 5) Ascertain the strategies to encourage postgraduate students in Oyo State, Nigeria to pursue PDFs in the diaspora.

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered at the end of the study.

- 1) Do the postgraduate students in Oyo State, Nigeria, understand the meaning of doing postdoctoral research in the diaspora?
- 2) Do postgraduate students wish to obtain PDFs in the diaspora?
- 3) What are the perceived benefits attached to PDFs in the diaspora?
- 4) What are the postgraduate students' perceived challenges in pursuing postgraduate studies in diaspora?
- 5) How can postgraduate students be encouraged to pursue postgraduate studies in diaspora?

The rest of the study is organised as follows: literature review as well as the conceptual and theoretical framework adopted to frame the study, the research methodology, outlining the process and steps undertaken to collect and analyse the data. Also, the presentation of the results as well as discussion of the findings. Lastly, the conclusion of the study, summarising the key insights and implications drawn from the research:

Literature Review

Many universities globally, interested in impacting PDFs, are designing programmes to support early career scholars (Lambert, et al., 2025; Sherry, 2013; Teelken et al., 2024). A postdoctoral research associate is responsible for assisting the educational institution's research department, writing research reports, publishing at least 2 units per annum as required by the host institutional in a highly reputable accredited journal both nationally and internationally – as prescribed in the letter of award and contract within the fellowship period. The minimum of the 2 publications will accrue to the relevant institution as their intellectual property, which will belong to the particular institution. Other events such as co-supervision, seminars and involvement in departmental activities will be required.

Postdoctoral Fellow Perceptions

Globally, and especially in the African diaspora academics have contributed immensely to academic development at the continental level (Kaba, 2024; Grinin & Korotayev, 2023; Oanda, & Obonyo, 2021; Ogachi, 2015). Postdoctoral fellowships are regarded as training and retraining of young emerging scholars in research in the skills of their chosen field of specialization. Many researchers have documented the positive impacts of postdoctoral fellowships on academic development in the diaspora (Abdulrahman & Gabriel, 2023; Huynh, 2021; Ogachi, 2015; Ortega et al., 2018). After the vigorous challenges of doctoral studies, the majority of PhD holders in Nigeria hardly venture into postdoctoral studies.

It is essential that new researchers venture into postdoctoral studies in the diaspora as this will avail them of opportunities for international experiences such as collaborative work, enhanced research abilities, international perspectives in other fields and an opportunity to have an international influence (Biao, 2006). Acquiring such skills and international experiences in postdoctoral programmes break new ground and provide room for research beyond the scope of one person's specialization. There is, therefore, an urgent need to create awareness among postgraduate students about the benefits and availability of postdoctoral fellowships in the diaspora. Despite the positive influence of diaspora networks and exposure, little empirical research is available on the positive effects of postdoctoral research.

Conditions Attached to Post-doctoral Fellowships (PDFs)

- The prospective candidate will follow the advert procedures – read the guideline carefully. If you do not meet the essential requirements, do not apply.
- Get advice from your PhD supervisor and other mentor on how to become PDF (they know better than you at this stage).
- Build your networks early – there is a lot of research available to help build networks. You might not find a formal postdoc position, but there might be an opportunity for collaborative work, i.e., (game collaboration) – identify the research area as well as the academics in that field.
- Look for compatibility with your own area of specialization and expertise.
- Have the mind of team player – be ready to work as part of a team, demonstrate respect towards the contribution and achievements of other colleagues. As a postdoc fellow, you must be ready to take on sometimes difficult and tiring fieldwork and be ready for different and demanding situations.
- Your boss – you have to be very comfortable with your host institution and your host supervisor, they will surely help you get what you want to get out of the postdoc.

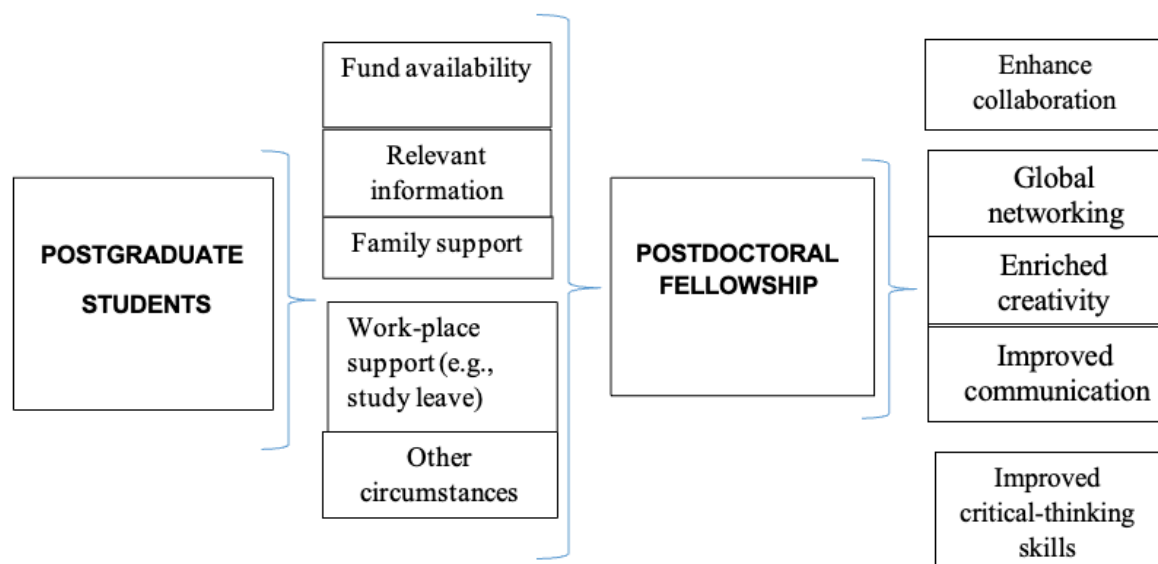
Research Support for PDFs

- Emerging research grants and other available financial support
- Payment for all the research publications
- Sponsorship for both local and international conferences
- Support in training and retraining for relevant skills needed for the tasks
- Support and mentoring from Postgraduate Research office on a PDF progress report
- Active group platform for relevant information to all the postdoctoral fellows

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Circumstances and Factors Influencing Postgraduate Students' Perceptions About the Benefits of Doing a Postdoctoral Fellowship



Source: The Authors (2025)

From Figure 1, it can be seen that postgraduate students with adequate funds for postgraduate studies and access to relevant information, as well as sufficient family and work-place support are likely to proceed from their doctoral to post-doctoral studies. Circumstances that are inimical such as – non-availability of fund, paucity of relevant information, inadequate family and work-place support, along with poor psychosocial circumstances can prevent them from transiting to postdoctoral fellowships. When a PhD holder with supporting circumstance proceeds to a PDF, they will encounter opportunities to enhance their relevant collaborations, their global connectivity, improve communication and empower critical thinking. These skills are all needed and expedient skills for the 21st century; as well as being precursors to sustainable quality education (SGDs No. 4).

Theoretical Review

Theory of Reason Action (TRA)

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) of Al-Suqri and Al-Kharusi (2015), explains behaviour and the reasons for differences in behaviour. The TRA states that behaviour is immediately determined by the behavioural intention, circumstances and perceived behavioural control. Relevant to this present study is the perceived behavioural control that postgraduate students have of postdoctoral fellowships in the diaspora. The circumstances that surround postgraduate students during their doctoral studies are the factors influencing their behavioural intentions (whether negative or positive) towards postdoctoral studies in the diaspora.

The Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) was created and developed by the American psychotherapist and psychologist Albert Ellis, who was inspired by many of the teachings of Asian, Greek, Roman and modern philosophers (Ellis, 2004; McMahon & Vernon, 2010). REBT is a type of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which is an action-oriented approach focused on helping people deal with irrational beliefs and learn how to manage their emotions, thoughts and behaviours in a healthier, more realistic way.

When people hold irrational beliefs about themselves or the world, problems can result. The goal of REBT is to help people recognize and alter those beliefs and negative thinking patterns in order to overcome psychological problems and mental distress. According to REBT, our cognition, emotions and behaviour are connected. In order to understand the impact of events and situations that people encounter throughout life, it is essential to look at the beliefs people hold about these experiences and the emotions that arise as a result of those beliefs.

A core concept of REBT is the ABC model. This model explains how, while we may blame external events for our unhappiness, it is our interpretation of these events that truly lies at the heart of our psychological distress. ABC is an acronym for: A: Activating event, which is when something happens in the environment around you; B: Belief, which describes your thoughts about the event or situation; C: Consequence, which is your emotional response to your belief. This theory has a bearing in the context of postgraduate students' perspectives on postdoctoral fellowships in Oyo State. The postgraduate students have access to postdoctoral fellowships, but their irrational thinking can limit their access to such wonderful academic exposure. It is the role of the postgraduate programme officer to raise awareness about and to create interest in postdoctoral fellowships among these students.

Empirical Review

Felisberti and Sear (2014) studied postdoctoral researchers in the UK to gain a snapshot of factors affecting their research outputs. The study used an online survey to explore the research questions. The findings showed reliable links between research outputs and research institutions, time spent on PDR and parental education. No clear links were observed between PDR outputs and research area, nationality, gender, number of siblings or work environment.

Chen et al. (2015) studied postdoctoral positions as preparation for desired careers as a narrative approach to understanding the postdoctoral experience. The findings revealed that the postdocs were beneficial in three ways; namely, intellectual, networking and institutional. It was found that these factors were all agentive in preparing for the future; yet, agency was exercised differently due to different institutional and personal contexts.

Scholars investigated the improving of the postdoctoral experience in an empirical approach (Patt et al., 2022). While the population of postdoctoral researchers in science and engineering has undergone a large expansion, the results found that a handful of straightforward and relatively inexpensive measures appear to make a large difference in postdoc productivity and in the overall quality of the postdoctoral experience.

Hayter and Parker (2018), in an exploratory study, inductively investigated factors that may influence a postdoc's transition to a non-academic career. They found that following influencing factors: individual factors; organizational and policy factors; the lack of relevant

skills; the absence of support and, in some cases, even opposition from their principal investigators; and poor availability of non-academic career preparation opportunities derived.

Methodology

Research Design

The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The qualitative data collection and analysis methods were adopted to answer the research questions.

Population and Sampling

All postgraduate students from public universities in Oyo State, Nigeria, i.e., University of Ibadan (UI) and Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH) constituted the population of the study. An accidental non-probabilistic sampling technique was used to interview the participants, based on their willingness to participate in the interviews.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

A five-item scale interview schedule was used entitled: Postgraduate Students Perspectives on Postdoctoral Fellowships in the Diaspora Interview (PSPPFDI). PSPPFDI was trial tested on 6 individuals and their responses were subjected to inter-rater reliability which yielded a value of 0.64. The interview was conducted on 10 respondents (5 from University of Ibadan and 5 from LAUTECH, Ogbomoso) and their responses subjected to thematic analysis.

Qualitative Data Collection

Moises (2020) agrees that an online data collection method appropriate for the collection of data from participants is through the use of questions to prompt discussion among the participants. Researchers constructed guided questions and kept records. Following these virtual conversations, the researcher formulated 5 items to be used either online, cell phone or WhatsApp calls for the individual interviews. The following open-ended questions were posed during the interviews and were thematically analysed to generate results for the study.

Question 1: What is a postgraduate fellowship? The question was intended to find out the understanding of postgraduate students about the meaning of PDFs, which helped to determine if the participants really understood what a PDF refers to.

Question 2 : Will you do PDF after your PhD? If not, Why? The reason for this question was to ascertain the interest of participants as to whether they have the desire to enter into PDFs after their doctoral degree.

Question 3: Will a PDF benefit to your career? This question is intended to find out if postgraduate students are aware of the advantages of doing a PDF.

Question 4: Why don't many PhD holders go on to do their PDFs? This question is intended to find out the possible problems and challenges confronting postgraduate students; and which prevent them from doing their postdoctoral fellowships after their doctoral degree.

Question 5: How can PDF holders be encouraged to go for their PDFs? The purpose of this question was to find out which factors encourage or discourage postgraduate students from pursuing postdoctoral studies in the diaspora.

Ethical/Concept Letter

A concept letter was written and sent to all participant's emails and WhatsApp. Those who participated in the research agreed with the study questions. The researcher guarantees all participants that the study will set up the optimised advantages for both participants and the community, and the study will be carried out honestly, openly and without any deceit or disinformation.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Meaning of Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Diaspora

Statements from the postgraduate students and doctoral degree students coded from this interview show that most respondents understood the meaning of PDF in the diaspora, which is supported by the literature (Segun et al., 2006).

Some of the responses from the respondents expressed the following views to support their understanding of postdoctoral fellowships in the diaspora:

“Thank you for the question, Postdoctoral fellowship is an extension of PhD programme, and it very useful for postgraduate student for exposure.”

“PDF is an advanced form of knowledge after you must acquire your PhD degree, whereby you learn from another person in order to be lean tutelage from another mentor in another institutional entered. Seeing your discipline outside your university.”

“Obviously, that is a fellowship that comes after your PhD degree, it offers to person as follow up with grants award to research.”

“I think it is a research activity after being a PhD holder.”

The researchers observed that most postgraduate students understood the meaning of postdoctoral fellowships in the diaspora.

Theme 2: Reasons for Doing Postdoctoral Fellowships Immediately After Doctoral Degrees

The following were some of the responses from participants on the reasons for doing their PDF after their doctoral degree:

“With all intentions, I am get reading to do it and I am preparing for it, it will boost my research in international.”

“Exactly, as postgraduate student, it will extend what I have been researching for, it boosts my research, it will open way for my international connection and affiliation.”

“Yes, if I have the opportunity, I will surely do it.”

“Definitely, if I have the opportunity to do to, I will because it will broaden my research and new pedagogy.”

“Yes, I will because basically, most people do not do their research after their doctoral degree, I think it will be very good to continue the research immediately.”

“Yes, I will like to go for it, if there will be opportunity.”

Theme 3: Benefits of Postdoctoral Fellowships to Individual Careers

“Exactly, as postgraduate student, it will extend what I have been researching for, it boosts my research, it will open way for my international connection and affiliation.”

“Yes, it will have benefit because I get learning other outside of my institution, that is how I will be opened more to many opportunities which I didn’t have before and collaborate to increase my network skill in other perspectives.”

“Yes, it will enable me to involve in international scholarship and even keep me more on research and to determine the career in research and publication and anything about academia.”

“Yes, it would, it will give me a bigger scope and more enlightenment as a researcher with collaboration in publishing paper.”

“It will improve excellently in academic performance for the rapid development of my career.”

“One of the benefits, to increase the knowledge as a researcher and have focus on particular area of interest and increase the knowledge in particular area.”

“Yes. because PDF will give you opportunity to relocate to an international community and build international experiences with the collaboration and networking with other researchers in diaspora.”

Theme 4: Why Many Postgraduates Do Not Go for Postdoctoral Fellowships

“It is unfortunately, because not all PhDs are allowed to do that and not all given opportunity to do especially when you are an academic, the person will not release in place of work for that and this is unfair for doctoral student to enlarge his/her connection.”

“That is an important question, some PhD they didn’t go because to get funds for the fellowship and the requirements are very rigorous and you must work in many areas that may not be in your area. There are some I got that they don’t want me to research in my area. And also, to get host to mentor in your area. Funding, host supervisor sometime difficult and the criteria are very difficult.”

“In this part of the world, Nigeria particularly, we have lack of information about this, lack of mentorship inline of PDF to guide to participate more in the PDF.”

“The first things, is that they are not aware, because they can start the PDF and another is fund.”

“Because most PhD holder do not have adequate orientation on the programme.”

“One of the major, many people are not motivated along the area, most of the research, if one didn’t have grants mine not be possible. Also, request for the PDF programme in many institutions were not mandatory. People see PhD degree and compulsory especially, when you work in academic environment.”

Theme 5: How to Motivate or Encourage Doctoral Degree Holders to Go for Their PDFs

“Actually, this programme of PDF is what PhD holder should attempt to do immediately after their doctoral degree. There should be policy from ministry of education to encourage PhD holder to assist them to go them, there should be support from government level to institutional level. Policy should be laid down to support this program.”

“Those people who have gone can share their experiences, and if they can be link up. The government or each institutional should make funds and host institution and mentor for the Postdoctoral fellow.”

“I think, when there is an exchange programme with outside university, that is collaboration between different university, it should be an avenue to encourage PhD student to boost their interest to go for the PDF immediately.”

“There should be awareness and training about the PDF and what it takes in the processing.”

“Postgraduate students and Doctoral degree holder should have proper orientation from government in the process to go for PDF programme.”

The results of the responses show that the majority of participants understand the meaning of postdoctoral fellowships. From the available qualitative data, the responses reveal that the majority, up to 90%, of the respondents understand the construct of postdoctoral research.

Discussion

From the qualitative data, thematically analysed, it was realized that the majority of the postgraduate students were aware of the demands and advantages of postdoctoral fellowships. Only very few among those interviewed were unaware of PDFs. This might be due to lexical or morphological mis-interpretation of the construct “postdoctoral.” These results are supported by an empirical study by Davis (2017) who found that the population of postdoctoral researchers in science and engineering has undergone a large expansion.

Equally, from the results of the study, many of the interviewed participants expressed a desire to proceed to postdoctoral fellowships if there was fund availability, relevant information, family supports, work-place support and positive goodwill to encourage their intentions. These results are corroborated by the findings of Davis (2017) that postdoctoral researchers in science and engineering have undergone a large expansion and many postgraduate students now wish to pursue fellowships. Also, the findings of Chen et al. (2015), show that postdocs assist in three ways; namely, intellectual, networking and institutional. It was found that these all contributed to preparing for the future.

Furthermore, the results indicate that postgraduates perceived immense benefits in PDFs thus enticing many of the respondents to intend to proceed to PDFs after their doctoral studies. This finding is also supported by Chen et al. (2015), who state that postdoctoral positions serve as preparation for desired careers and many PhD holders plan to embark on PDFs for career enhancement.

Additionally, the results of the study revealed that many PhD holders did not enter PDFs due to many factors ranging from paucity of information, lack of funds, inadequate support from family and many other extenuating factors precluding them from PDFs in the diaspora. These results are supported by the findings of Felisberti and Sear (2014) who studied postdoctoral researchers in the UK. They found that factors promoting their research output included a reliable nexus between research output and research institutions, time spent in PDR, parental education and support for PDF.

Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that postgraduate students can be encouraged to proceed to their PDF. Timeous awareness programmes and political will, as reflected in policy statements, as well as adequate information from the postgraduate schools can provide an impetus for postgraduate students to embark on their PDF.

From the study, it can be concluded that many of the postgraduate students in Oyo state are aware of postdoctoral fellowships (PDFs) and that many of them are willing to proceed on to a PDF after their PhD studies. Additionally, there are enormous benefits inherent in doing a PDF SUCH AS WHAT; and that governmental policy and postgraduate schools should support awareness campaigns and the diffusion of relevant information in order to facilitate the transition for postgraduate students to postdoctoral fellowships.

Conclusion

There should be an inclusive policy in the Ministry of Education in Nigeria to encourage postgraduate students to apply to do their postdoctoral fellowship immediately after their doctoral degree. There should be regular seminars and symposia for postgraduate students (Masters and PhD) on the need for postdoctoral fellowships. Postgraduate schools at institutions in Nigeria should run awareness programmes in the form of posters, conferences, workshops and symposia on the benefits of doing a postdoctoral fellowship.

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