

Part 5

Law and Education: Legislation and Inclusive Education, Child Protection & Human Rights Education

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An Exploration of the Wider Costs of the Decision by the Rivers State Government in Nigeria to Revoke International Students' Scholarships

Abstract

In a move intended to cut costs to the state, the government of Rivers State has announced that it is revoking international scholarships for its young people studying overseas (except for final year students). Whether or not there are corresponding courses available for them back in Nigeria, some 600 students are effectively being recalled and will have to complete their degree studies in higher education institutions in Nigeria. This controversial decision can be subject to analysis on several different levels: from an economic point of view, does a cost-benefit analysis show this to be an effective measure; legally, has the Rivers State government breached its contract with the students and potentially also infringed their human rights? These questions can be subject to much debate and will take time to resolve. The full economic costs/benefits of the policy change, and the legal ramifications, may not be known for many years to come. This paper takes a more immediate look at the impact of the decision, by considering the views of some of the 600 students caught up in the middle of this key policy change. Data collection was based on interactions with the students and a telephone interview. The findings of research demonstrate deep concerns and objections from the students and their parents, with main emphasis on the damage to their future career, although with few students very positive about going back home to complete their study. The findings at this initial stage will further explore the legal implications, humanitarian and rights of the students in relation to their signed contracts for the scholarship award.

Keywords: education, scholarship award, students, policy change, human capital, violation of human rights

Introduction: Overseas scholarships for Nigerian students

Every year, more than 4,000 Nigerian undergraduates write aptitude tests to join the ever growing list of students which the government bodies – RSSB and other agencies such as the RSSDA, NDDC and Shell Nigeria support in Nigerian Universities and studying overseas. The applicants are shortlisted on the basis of the national Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) and Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) examination results. This is followed by an aptitude

test at their designated areas such as Port Harcourt, Warri, Enugu, Lagos and Abuja centres.

There are two categories of the Scholarship Scheme, the National Merit Award (NM), open to Nigerian undergraduates and Areas of Operation Merit Award (AOM), for students from communities in which Shell Nigeria operates. Only first year students are eligible for the awards in both categories.

An average of 16,000 applicants respond to advertisements by the Nigerian government and other agencies every year, inviting qualified candidates to apply for the scholarships which are tenable on Nigerian Universities or to study abroad.

The Rivers State Government, through the Rivers State Sustainable Development Agency (RSSDA) offers the “State Government’s Special Overseas Undergraduate Scholarship Programme” to suitably qualified candidates of both Rivers State and non-Rivers state origin. Awards per student covers the Air fare, Tuition (school, lab, books, etc.), Accommodation (halls of residence within the school, private apartments outside the school) and Monthly upkeep.

Human Capital Development is one of the core stated aims of the Rivers State Sustainable Development Agency (RSSDA). It is geared towards improving the human capital base of Rivers indigenes (and also non-indigenes in many cases) through target programmes, which include the overseas undergraduate scholarship, overseas postgraduate scholarship, ICT training, Greater Horizon and Opportunities Programme, Overseas Technical Training programme to mention but a few. These scholarships are available to young people from Rivers State who must meet the laid down criteria.

Eligible groups

Undergraduate students of both Rivers and non-Rivers origin, so long as the latter are children/wards of taxpaying non-indigenes that have been resident in Rivers state for a minimum of 10 years.

Scholarships are available for study in fields including Engineering, Petroleum, Oil and Gas, Medical Sciences, Economics and Computer Related Studies, to mention but a few.

A lot of Nigerian students on scholarship derive a lot of benefits particularly to some from poor families of whom without the scholarship award, cannot afford to study for a degree more so to study abroad.

The amount of benefit gains for students on scholarship range from, air fare, tuition, accommodation and upkeep allowances. To qualify for a scholarship award, students can apply through online, manually, or Local Government Council Secretariat nearest to the candidates and each student has to go through an aptitude test with the originals of their credentials seen during the screening of shortlisted candidates.

Between 2009 and 2014, over 600 Nigerian students from Rivers State were sent overseas to acquire foreign education of which over 400 students were placed in various UK institutions. However, based on political upheavals with the present Nigerian government policy on managing change, change of government from People’s Democratic Party (PDP) to All Progressives Congress (APC) imposed a challenge to the scholarship students studying abroad. Coupled with the financial implications as a result of a fall in oil prices which was the major source of Nigerian

revenue with a reduction in State allocation resulted in an announcement by the Rivers State Governor to withdraw all foreign students' scholarship award, except for final year students who were asked to stay behind to complete their programmes. This obviously has an impact on those affected.

Background: Policy change by the Rivers State government

In 2009, Governor Rotimi Amaechi under the then PDP government offered scholarship award to deserving Rivers State indigenes to study for an undergraduate and postgraduate programmes following a rigorous screening which was aimed to help those disadvantaged to come abroad to gain foreign education in such places as the United Kingdom, India and Canada to mention. The most important aspect of awarding scholarship to Rivers indigenes was to give access and opportunity to the youths of River State Nigeria to come abroad to study those courses that are not available in the Nigerian institutions; and to fill up the gaps in skill shortages in the Nigerian labour market. It was a big privilege for the students and their parents whose hopes were raised with the expectation that their children will be returning home with these aimed-for qualifications.

However, a good number of the advantaged students that came to study overseas spent one or three years, completed their programmes and went back home to serve the state. The policy of the Scholarship award is that students on scholarship on completion of their programmes must come back home to serve their States through Youth service, done for one year as a give back to the state government as long as they are below 50 years old. In this policy, the students benefit with all their fees and allowances fully paid until they complete their programmes.

After the 2015 election and the change in government, the award of scholarship was no longer the primary responsibility of the Ex-Governor Rotimi Amaechi, hence the onus now lies on Wike government who is the predecessor of Rotimi Amaechi government. Governor Wike having resumed office in May 2015, coupled with the political desire to implement a proposed change in Nigeria by the present incumbent; on 3rd December 2015, he announced the State policy to withdraw the awardees' scholarship abroad due to financial crisis in Rivers State as well as entire Nigeria.

In 2009 when the scholarship scheme was implemented by the Ex-Governor, many people were overwhelmed with the decision, which was believed would facilitate a cross fertilisation of ideas, knowledge and best practices in education of the Rivers State Youths, as the beneficiaries would return home with fresh insights that would also contribute immensely to the development of their state. This decision instigated the formation of the RSSB scholarship board formation committee with a Chairman to oversee the Scholarship Board with the primary aim of awarding scholarships to Rivers State students who met the criteria for award of scholarship. Even though the scheme was said to have plagued by logistics and lapses, which sometime was threaten to the entire exercise, it managed to trudge on amid complaints with many students having to benefit from academic achievement particularly in gaining access to a British education.

The Rivers State government says it can no longer continue to fund the Rivers State Sustainable Development Agency, RSSDA, overseas scholarship, although no mention of the Rivers State Scholarship students (RSSB) who are also the

beneficiaries of the Rivers State scholarship scheme. However, the suspension by the incumbent Rivers State government led by Governor Wike, owing to the dire financial straits, a dwindling revenue both from FAC and IGR and problem of exchange rates, which is affecting the State, has left many of the beneficiaries in foreign universities and their parents and guardians in shock and frustrated hence leading to some social and psychological implications on those affected.

Parents and guardians are also concerned by the fact that some of the courses studied by the beneficiaries abroad were not offered in the two Rivers universities, where the government are offering them the opportunity to complete their programmes that they started overseas.

As one of the beneficiaries said, since government is a continuous process, the Wike-led administration should strive to ensure that those that are currently enjoying the scholarship are seen to the end of their programmes, as bringing them back to state-owned universities would drastically affect their studies as well as their emotion.

He also said, “If you bring them back, the beneficiaries would suffer psychological, emotional and social trauma. Even if the programme should be discontinued due to paucity of funds, government should allow those already in school to finish their education” (Godwin in Guardian, 2016).

Theories of adaptation and change

Education policies are the principles and government policy-making in educational sphere, as well as the collection of laws and rules that govern the operation of education systems. Education occurs in many forms for many purposes through many institutions. Education is the process of receiving or giving a systematic instruction, especially at a school or university. According to Merriam-Webster, education is the action or process of teaching someone especially in a school, college, or university; the knowledge, skill, and understanding that you get from attending a school or university. Education is affected by the rapid changes imposed by government policy, rules and regulations.

Ford and Ford (1995) and Rollinson (2008) both define “change as a move from being in one organisational state to being in another state”. Rollinson (2008, p. 632) further qualifies “organisational change as the ability of an organisation to survive change and will depend on its ability to master the process of change”. Mullins (1996, p. 823) identifies that “despite the positive outcome, change is often resisted at both an individual and organisational level” and for the students, there is a need to resist due to a drastic impact it may have on them. It is common for the students to react and or resist to this change, in a variety of ways, depending on the scale and scope of change and how this will impact on them and the government of Rivers State considering the financial implications envisaged.

However, the most common reasons for resistance to change are seen as – *Fear of the unknown* – given that students are generally settled in their various programmes, may exhibit episodes of anxiety stemming from misplaced fear of the unknown, in terms of them being withdraw from their existing courses in the UK and being asked to go back home to complete their courses.

Security with the status quo – generally students may have developed a sense of security with their current UK institutions with some already given some

responsibilities as student leadership, acquainted with friends, systems and processes seen as familiar territory. Change and upheaval may invoke a sense of loss and further compound feelings of fearfulness and or anxiety and hence will lead to resistance to go back to home countries to accomplish their career.

Status and position – anyone facing changes are mindful of their positions within the organisational hierarchy and changes may be viewed as major threat in the attempt to alter this, the Governor may have made his decision based on the present financial crisis in the State and to secure funds to run the State and for the students, they need to retain their status in their various institutions.

Change is a complex phenomenon, requiring examination from different angles including individual students and political perspectives. However the most common generic reasons for resistance to change can be linked to *uncertainty* – in nature, individuals have varying capacities to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity and therefore will resist change regardless of the good that may come with it. Consequently, the change process may be a rather distressing and unsettling experience particularly to these students as it came to them as a shock and unexpected. On the economic and career aspects there are concerns that any changes imposed may hinder their opportunity in securing a good job without a British education which they left home for; and this will affect their rewards on the job market or threaten the job security.

Change can result in inconveniences or disruptions to on-going programmes hence resistance sets in as in the case of the Rivers State students. Change can result in *habitual tendencies* – people acquire habitual, ways and approaches of conducting the duties and they find comfort in its success, for the students, they are comfortable with their work and ways of doing things here, asking them to go back can be difficult to learn new ways of operating which can lead to resistance. Students have already made friends in UK, therefore loss of associations with their colleagues – settled teams; work groups are all difficult situations to face hence resistance sets in.

Methodology

The work is derived from our day to day interactions with the international students in dealing with their academic and welfare issues that may affect their studies. The students for this study are the international students from Rivers State Nigeria who are on government sponsorship. The research was based on our experience and a recent government announcement to withdraw the scholarship awards from 600 students studying overseas which UK students are affected. This drastic decision and fear of the proposed change prompted us to carry out this mini study to find out how the students and their parents felt about the announcement on completing a degree and impact on their career development going back to their home countries without a degree.

To capture the students' comments, a telephone interview was employed to a sampled opinion of 60 students, 36 from the Rivers State Scholarship Board (RSSB) and 24 from Rivers State Development Agency (RSSDA) studying in UK which we felt are relevant to this small scale study.

Views of students affected by the Rivers State government decision

The majority of the students interviewed have commented on how the change in policy of withdrawing their scholarship award has given them some social and psychological impact.

Socially I am ashamed to go back home to face my colleagues whom I proudly told that I was leaving them in 2014 heading to UK for my degree with the award of RSSDA scholarship. How can I now go back home to face my friends and colleagues without my degree, God forbid, they have to change this policy, I bet it was said because of the political pressure at home. Madam, please speak to the government using your educational knowledge in UK. (Student 3)

I just feel that my future is ruined. I am neither here or there now. Please let this not happen to me. I am in the middle of finishing my year two, how can I go home to start all over. Nigerian universities do not have same facilities, for oil & gas programme. This should not happen. I can't sleep. I left home to have a UK degree, I must go back home with a degree. (Student 8)

My parents cannot even pay my fees back home. Both of my parents are on pension, who will support me to complete the degree. I disagree with this idea. (Student 9)

I understand that the present government have come for a change and that change has some financial implications which can affect people. Stopping our funding means a bad impact on us and affecting me emotionally and psychologically, the thought of going back home to complete my programme is enough to get me mad. Why give us a scholarship that will not sustain our programme to completion, what a waste of time and resources, serious impact on my career and my future development. (Student 28)

Well, I can understand the reasons behind the Governor's decision to send us back to complete our programme at home, there are many of us here, if no money to continue with us here, what can we do, I appreciate the opportunity but if they cannot afford it anymore, I am happy to go back home to continue, as long as they put me in a university that has all the facilities for my course. It drains me emotionally, but I have to bear it because, it's all about change. (Student 31)

I thank the past government for their kindness in awarding us scholarship to come and study abroad, but they did not end it well by not accomplishing the aim. It is a shameful and most embarrassing of all to ask students studying abroad to come back home without completing their programme. Which of the universities will offer us the type of facilities over here? For me change has not done me good and I hate change. (Student 37)

Conclusion and further research

The findings of the survey indicates deep concerns and objections from the students and their parents on implementation of this policy to 'withdraw' the students in the middle of completing their programmes and not achieving British qualifications, with main emphasis on the damage to their future career, although with minority still positive to go back home to complete their programmes. However, this work is an on-going research and will further explore the legal implications, humanitarian and rights of the students in relation to their signed contracts for the scholarship award.

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