



Transition from Higher Education in Nigeria to the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Moving across international borders to take up lecturing job in a higher institution is a significant life event with subjective experience and expectations that may impact the wellbeing of the individual and their new environment. The aim of this paper was to review the factors contributing to the transition experience of a lecturer from an African country in a UK university. Literature review, anecdotal narratives, and reflection were used.

Differences in culture and technological advancement were identified as factors contributing to the transitional difficult experience of a lecturer from Nigeria working in a university in the UK. Language as a symbolic aspect of culture is an area the author did not expect to have difficulty; but because of the differences in the Received Language and the accent spoken by most natives in the UK, the author experienced initial psychological distress listening to different accents of English language. The culture of lower power distance in the UK contrasts with what obtains in Nigeria. So, the author was initially uncomfortable to see how senior and junior colleagues and students could relate officially without officious formalities. The individualist as against collectivistic culture in the UK was another thing to adapt to, so also the practice of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion which allows everyone freedom from discrimination due to protected characteristics such as gender that goes beyond binary. The identified technological difference related to Electronic Learning Environment (ELE) and the battery of integrated software for communication and organizing tasks were a bit of a challenge at the beginning.

Transition from an African country to the UK as a lecturer in higher learning environment attracts challenges of cultural and technological differences. Forewarning and organized orientation on arrival of the differences may lessen the possibility of the distress occasioned by the life event.

Keywords: Clinical Nursing; Higher Education; Nigeria; UK

Abbreviations

ELE: Electronic Learning Environment; RP: Received Pronunciation; MT: Microsoft Team.

Introduction

The internalisation of academia has significantly altered the global higher education environment [1]. A simple definition of transition is “a passage from one fairly stable

state to another" [2]. Not knowing what to expect or having expectations that are at variance to reality during transition may be associated with stress [3]. This paper narrates and reflects on the author's transition related experiences after switching from a lecturing job in Nigeria to one in the UK.

The core of pedagogy in Higher education lecturing may be similar from country to country but the context of delivery is dependent on the culture [4,5] and technological advancement [6-8]. The differences in contexts may pose challenges for a lecturer who relocates to another country to continue the profession there. This happened to be my experience on taking up an appointment as a lecturer in one of the universities in England. I had always been a nurse lecturer in Nigeria, with clinical nursing by the side. Even when I had several opportunities to change to full-time bedside nursing, I stuck with teaching nursing students because that is where my passion lies. So barely a year after I relocated to the UK as a mental health nurse and took up an appointment with a mental health facility, I knew I had to find my way back to lecturing. When I got a job as a mental health lecturer, I was elated but that emotion, for a while, turned into distress when face with the challenges of transiting into the role of lecturing in an UK higher education environment. It was a struggle until I got adapted to the system. In the process of adaptation, I realized that there is currently a dearth of literature on the difficulties encountered by people transiting from one national higher educational context to another. The experience informed the aim of this paper and its research questions.

Research Questions

- What are the differences between the contexts of higher education lecturing in Nigeria and UK?
- What are the challenges posed by the differences for a lecturer from Nigerian university system relocating to the UK?
- What arrangements are required to ease the transition?

Methods

A mixed method of study using narrative literature review, anecdotal instances, and reflection, combining qualitative approaches, to explore experienced context of higher education in the UK, which is associated with difficulties facing lecturers from abroad, and factors to assuage the transition. The review synthesized existing research gleaned from multiple search engines, including Directory of Open Access, PubMed, and google scholar. This provided overview key themes on the subject. Anecdotal evidence are personal stories or accounts that convey lived experiences and can reveal new angles of a phenomenon that might be overlooked in more formal data collection. Reflection is the process of

actively thinking about and critically engaging with personal role in the subject. It reveals biases, interpretive layers, and deeper insights from the data.

Procedure

Identify the differences in the Higher educational systems in the UK and Nigeria which pose a transition challenge to a lecturer and relate this with anecdotal experience and reflection.

Review of Literature and Anecdotes

While United Kingdom has centuries of Higher education [9], the first Nigerian university was established by the British government as recently as 1948 [10]. It is therefore expected that there will be differences in the cultures and technological advancements of universities in the two nations. The culture of a university is related to its image [4] and academic integrity [5]. But universities differ in their cultures and the effort they make at changing them [4]. While the UK universities have Technology-Enhanced Learning Strategy [6], there are challenges for adoption of such in the Nigerian context [11]. Nigeria is considered as one of the developing countries formerly known as third world countries. They have attendant problems which make it nearly impossible to keep up with the advancement in technology to aid teaching and learning. The reason to this is not far-fetched, knowledge and technology becomes outdated rapidly and need to be updated regularly and constantly [12].

Culture

11th juror: (rising) "I beg pardon, in discussing . . ."
 10th juror: (interrupting and mimicking) "I beg pardon. What are you so goddam polite about?"
 11th juror: (looking straight at the 10th juror) "For the same reason you're not. It's the way I was brought up."
 —Reginald Rose, *Twelve Angry Men* [13]

The above shows a juror who has a culture in which someone in a higher position is given regard and recognised to have a higher power and another juror from a culture with belief of an inequality irrespective of position. The conflict that ensued would not have occurred if the event took place in a culturally inclusive milieu. This is why it is critical for culture to be given due recognition in any society and organisation.

Culture is an abstract concept with many meanings depending on the discipline in which it is defined, such as anthropology, sociology, or management. Whatever the discipline though, culture is seen either as collective behaviour or as something that resides in individual

interpretation and cognitions [14]. A formal definition of cultures is "...a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." When culture has been established, the underlying assumptions go out of awareness [15].

Another definition is "...the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others." The group can be based on nations, organizations, regions, occupations, genders and so; in which case, we refer to national, organizational, regional, occupational, and gender cultures and so on [13]. Culture is dynamic, evolving from interactions among group members and shaped by leadership [15].

Building Blocks of Culture

The concept of culture is neatly captured as consisting of two blocks: the invisible (values) and the visible (rituals, heroes, and symbols). Values are the core of any culture. They determine what is preferred and what is not. They attract feelings in a bipolar manner, such as good versus bad, ugly versus beautiful, normal versus abnormal, and so on. Values are acquired early in life and are expressed through rituals (non-essential activity that are considered social necessity such as ways of greeting), heroes (persons, dead or alive who are regarded as models for behaviours) and symbols (words, gestures, dress, hairstyles) of cultural meaning [13].

My Initial Distress with the Language: Are we not speaking the same English?

The official language in my country of origin is English. So, I did not foresee any communication difficulty with native English speakers. Initially, during official meetings, I could hardly make out what was being said. Some words seemed to be lost in the sound. Often, I had to guess the "lost" words and connect the dots to have an idea of what was said. When frustrated, I had to interject with "I beg your pardon". I felt embarrassed to have to cut in often with the phrase. I felt even more embarrassed when I was often asked to repeat my statements. It was surprising to me how anybody would find it difficult to understand my "clear" English. An awful day was when I had to take multiple buses to a place with the guide of google map. The app "messed up" in between bus stops and I had to ask people for direction. Receiving phone calls was something I dreaded because I could hardly hear anything from some callers while I had no iota of problem clearly understanding other callers. I initially thought it was my phone speaker that had the problem, so,

I opted for earpiece during phone conversations. It did not solve the problem. My fear about the communication barrier was allayed when I learnt that the problem is common with international speakers of English due to the difference in the Received Pronunciation (RP) used for learning English language and the variety of accents used by native speakers [16]. Only about 3% of the native speakers in the UK use the RP. Many international persons I spoke with about my ordeal kept reassuring me that with time I would be used to the different accents in the country. I did not believe them, but it did eventually happen that I began to "hear almost every word" and able to pronounce in a way that others understand easily.

National Culture

The four dimensions that define national culture are power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance.

Power Distance

Power distance is defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" [13]. The larger the distance, the less likely that a worker will directly approach or counter the behaviour of their bosses. Among 76 countries surveyed from 6 regions of the world, Nigeria ranked 17th while Great Britain ranked 65th [13].

Too informal for comfort: experience of reduced power distance

I did not see it coming when at the interview panel for the lecturing job, a student representative was present. Though it was strange to me, I assumed "it might be their way of encouraging students' participation in deciding who their lecturers are"; while at the same time, I saw it as a pointer to an erosion of power distance between the lecturer and the students.

Also, during occasions which I would ordinarily regard as official, I experience peer-like interactions with my colleagues at work. We call even the "boss" by first name. Many of us are called by our "preferred" names, which sound like nicknames, casual, informal, to me. The first day I had a student call me by my first name was when it dawned on me that I was in a different culture, without the kind of "respect for the elders" which I was used to. Where I came from, respect for people above is demonstrated through bowing or kneeling to greet, using sir or ma to call or respond to call, and using prefix with surname and so on [13]. In the UK too, respect is mandatory, but based on different cultural

believes and expressed through different practices. In the UK, the assumption is that everyone is equal with equal right irrespective of age, status or position and therefore deserve equal respect, expressed mainly through respect of everyone's opinions, decisions, and behaviours if they are within the law of the land [13].

My observation at the university is that there is low power distance between junior and senior colleagues and between lecturers and students. There is nearly no visible dividing line between them in terms of address title, office paraphernalia, and power aura. I remember an occasion when I got an email from a student whose assignment I assessed. In her email, she challenged her score and made strong confrontational remarks which was nearly impossible for a student to write to their lecturer where I was coming from. I was shocked but later understood that the low power distance in the culture allows for such behaviour.

Collectivism versus Individualism

A country with high Individualism is that in which "the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family" while that with high collectivism is such in which "people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty." Great Britain ranked 3rd in individualism while Nigeria ranked 58th [13]. In Nigeria, family, nuclear and extended, is closely knitted. There are strong ties that transcend between family members to neighbours, communities and, by extension, to institutions of learning and workplace [17]. On arrival in the UK, I felt isolated. It was like "every man to his own tent" in my neighbourhood. I became anxious and felt isolated. The experience extended to my workplace. I tried to fit but it seemed impossible at first. So many times, I felt uneasy when I went to the hospital to work, uncertain of how my day would go. I tried to put on a smile, but it was difficult. I perceived everyone as just being on their own. It was a difficult experience for me, an experience I would not wish for any other internationally educated nurse. I had the same experience at the initial period of my assumption of duty at the Academy of Nursing. With time, however, I blended into system and found my balance in the strongly individualistic community.

Femininity and Masculinity

These have to do with whether emotional gender roles are clearly distinct or not: in a nation with high masculinity, "men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life" [13].

However, in a nation with high femininity "both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. GB ranked 13th in Femininity while Nigeria ranks 41st [13]. Coming from a culture where man is considered the 'almighty', I appreciate the "femininity" cultural aspect of the UK which allows for voices to be heard, regardless of gender. Nonetheless, finding that courage to be expressive as a female might still be a little challenging for someone from my cultural background.

Uncertainty Avoidance

This is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. GB ranked 68th in UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE while Nigeria ranks 54 [13]. A low-ranking country in uncertainty avoidance cultural dimension (like GB) is comfortable with ambiguous situations, sees what is different as curious rather than dangerous and has more lenient rules on what is "taboo". UK's lower rank in this cultural dimension reflects on my observation of the basic view of the people at the university Exeter with respect to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

Two lecturers were discussing about a student in my presence, but they kept referring to the student as "they", "them". "How many students are we talking about?" I asked them. They explained that it was one student who identified with both male and female genders. Because of where I was coming from, I had my reservations initially but resolved to 'behave like the romans when in Rome. My native culture, being more of uncertainty avoidance in nature [13], has basic assumption of absolute truth that gender is either male or female: it is more of good or bad, black or white, with no grey areas in between. Therefore, it is taken in my culture of origin that gender being male versus female, without additional category is the "truth". Anything outside these is taken as is wrong or bad.

Another cultural view about people which was a bit strange to me was giving diligent consideration to students with special needs to enable them benefit maximally in their studies. To me, it was assumed that every university student is in school because they have sufficient capacity to be there, and they should all be treated same way to be fair to everyone; no need to give anyone "undue" advantage. So, if a student passes; it's because they are good enough and well-focused in their study; if otherwise, they need to look into themselves. This assumption jumped to my face when I was designing assessment for a module I lead. I was directed to consider some students with special needs in the assessment. Some of them would require extra time for the assessment; some of them would require skill demonstration before fewer or "no"

observers. To me initially, it was like undue advantage. Now I understand the difference with equality and equity and the need for inclusion.

Organization Culture

Organizational culture is a new concept and is recognized as a basic construct to determine the health of higher education institutions. It can be used by academic leaders to introduce change strategies and set the direction and collective behaviour of the institution. [14]. Just as new students who are coming into the higher institution bring along their life experiences to interact with the institution's culture, language, behaviour, artifacts, rules, and symbol with consequences that may or may not be productive for learning and success [18], a new lecturer may experience same. Cultures of work organizations are acquired through socialization at the workplace, which most people enter as adults—that is, with their basic values firmly in place. A business culture (like the culture of banking, or of tourism) can be placed somewhere between the occupation and the organization level [19]. Trying to discover an institution's culture as an outsider is a difficult task [20].

Technological Challenges

Perhaps, more than the cultural difficulties, my initial headache during the transition had to do more with the technological advancement of my university here in the UK. The Electronic Learning Environment (ELE) and the battery of integrated software for communication and organizing tasks were a bit of a challenge at the beginning.

Electronic Learning Environment (ELE)

I had studied with ELE and had taught with video conferencing software (zoom), but I never had to design an online course, upload learning resources on an enterprise electronic learning platform, or assess and score students on such a system (BART). To compound my challenge, I was made a module lead of a course in less than one year. By that role, I had to configure the course online: add sections and set the start and end dates of each, labels, and images. I also had to upload my learning resources, which hitherto had been done on my behalf by my kind colleagues. It took me some time to get comfortable with the system to the point that I am now in the position to assist my colleagues upload their materials. Learning all these was not easy, but I got help from some of my colleagues and online tutorials.

Video Conference Tool for Learning

Another eLearning tool which I had to learn on the job was Microsoft Team (MT). I was used to zoom, not MT.

I did not have much problem getting around using the tool until I needed to assign the students to four [4] break out room. I created the rooms quite alright but placing them in the different rooms during the class was a challenge. I also had challenge selecting my work email address as the one for setting up team meeting for the student. The difficulty started when I was assigned a second email address as the faculty lead for REI.

Critical Reflection

- **What?**
“Culture shock”
“Studying culture without experiencing culture shock is like practicing swimming without water”[13]. Culture shock and the stages of culture shock are part of the acculturation process. Berry [21] proposed a model that categorises individual adaptation strategies along two dimensions. The first dimension is about retention or rejection of an individual's native culture. While in transition in the UK, I asked myself this question many times: is retaining my native culture a value to maintaining my identity and characteristics?

Looking back, I realise that I was not fully prepared for the transition from working as a nurse lecturer in Nigeria to working as same in the UK. I did not foresee the difficulty that would emanate from the differences in the accents between mine and local speakers, differences in cultural assumptions and values and differences in educational technology.

- **So What?**
Aligning with Berry's Model of Acculturation's second dimension which concerns itself with the adoption or rejection of the host culture. I asked myself, is there any benefit to maintaining relationships with the larger society? If yes, what are the steps I need to take? Do I need to lose myself because I want to be part of the larger society? If I don't, what will be the implications of my functioning as an effective teacher/lecturer in the UK higher education/institution?

The process of acculturation emerges through different strategies.

- **Assimilation:** an individual takes up the cultural norms of the host culture over their original culture.
- **Separation:** this is rejection of the host culture. The individual favours his or her own culture over the host culture.
- **Integration:** this is when an individual can adapt the cultural norms of the host culture while still maintaining his or her culture.

- **Marginalization:** this is to the extreme, the individual rejects both the host and origin culture.
- The different experiences I had was an indication that no culture is better than the other and for me to succeed I must integrate the two cultures to bring out my best.

- **Now What?**

Without effective orientation, trying to discover an institution's culture as an outsider is a difficult task [22]; however, because of self-reflection, I have decided to have an open mind towards my host culture while I showcase the beauty of mine. I do not plan to change my host culture or abandon it, but to bring the two experiences and apply it to my teaching assignment to bring out the best in my students, since they are diverse. It is not going to happen through magic, but I will persist in the endeavour of integration.

Summary

What are the differences between the contexts of higher education lecturing in Nigeria and UK?

In summary, this paper identified cultural and technological differences between higher institutions in Nigeria and UK to explain the anecdotal experience and challenges of the author in the transition period when switched from lecturing in Nigeria to doing same in the UK. The key cultural factors that contributed to the transition experience were difference in power distance, femininity-masculinity, collectivistic-individualist, and uncertainty-avoidance dimensions of culture between UK and Nigeria.

What are the challenges posed by the differences for a lecturer from Nigerian university system relocating to the UK?

All the challenges faced during the transition had to do with communication difficulty occasioned by differential accents, grappling with experiencing different cultural dimensions and struggling to catch up with more advanced learning technologies.

What arrangements are required to ease the transition?

Effective orientation (prior to and on arrival) to new culture will make it easier for an international lecturer to adapt quickly to the university community in the UK.

Conclusions and Recommendations

An international lecturer coming to UK to teach would invariably experience some distress associated with differences in culture and technology.

To mitigate the transition distress, it is recommended that:

- Pre-arrival orientation be organised. This may involve the use of links to texts and audiovisual on the culture and technology to expect in the university community. It may include a list of all electronic tools instruction on how to get basic training on each tool.
- Orientation on arrival be put in place. This may include hands-on introduction to technology platform of the university.
- Acculturation mentorship be set up to support the effort of the individual at integrating into the new organizational culture.
- Every internationally trained lecturer should be forewarned about the initial language shock and reassured that it is only a matter of short time for them to pick the native accents.

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