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# Learning Preferences and Support Opportunities for Online African Doctoral Students

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## Authors

**Blessing F. Adeoye, PhD**

School of Higher Education, Leadership, and  
Policy

[blessing.adeoye@mail.waldenu.edu](mailto:blessing.adeoye@mail.waldenu.edu)

**Laura Knight Lynn, PhD**

Center for Research Quality

[laura.lynn@mail.waldenu.edu](mailto:laura.lynn@mail.waldenu.edu)

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## Abstract

Researchers in this qualitative study interviewed a mix of 14 African students and alumni on their doctoral experience. Interviews included questions on what motivated them, the challenges they faced, and suggestions for future students. Data were collected via telephone interviews, and transcriptions were analyzed inductively using the In Vivo software. Key findings identified included: a need for better financial assistance, technology access, and targeted support. Learning preferences identified were spread across a variety of modalities. Specific aspects of the academic residency experience were identified as essential for progress and completion. Participants also provided several recommendations to support international students' success.

*Completed Research*

## Problem

Online higher education provides African students opportunities, and graduate online education helps bridge critical educational gaps in developing countries.

African-based educational opportunities for African students seeking higher education **are limited, particularly for working adults with families.**

Within continental Africa, university education is primarily accessible to younger students from upper-middle-class and affluent backgrounds. (Car-Hill, 2020, Kalisa & Picard 2019).

While it is generally understood that online African national students potentially face numerous challenges that western students do not, **research is needed on these students' experiences and opportunities for support.**

## Purpose

This **qualitative study** aims to understand online African national doctoral students' doctoral experience within a large US Online University that serves students internationally.



# Significance

This study was developed to:

- Provide information so that universities can best support African national students who are working to improve schools, businesses, and organizations within continental Africa.
- Provide the field with insights about needs of African national students pursuing doctorates online.



# Theory or Framework

**Student attrition theory** (Bean & Metzner, 1985) describes non-traditional students' attrition, including distance learners, and includes:

- **Student variables**, such as study habits and course availability; background and defining variables such as age, educational goals, ethnicity;
- **Environmental variables** such as finances, hours of employment, family responsibilities, and outside encouragement; and academic and psychological outcomes while at the college as the factors affecting persistence.

These variables can challenge students by putting too much pressure on their time, resources, and sense of well-being. (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

# Relevant Scholarship

Targeted advising and support services have been shown to have a positive impact on student success (Fiore, Heitner & Shaw, 2019). Student persistence research in doctoral education has shown that international students may be more focused on the pragmatic aspects of a doctoral program as compared to US students (Casey, Saclarides & Lubienski, 2018).

Research in online higher education in Africa has looked at both the learning experiences and feedback of students. Findings indicate that undergraduate online African college students experience unique challenges and have identified variety learning preferences and motivating factors.

In a study of Zimbabwe online students, the most-reported challenges were lack of sufficient time for study, difficulties in access and use of ICT, ineffective feedback, and lack of study materials (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, & Zebron, 2015). In a survey study of Nigerian online students learning preferences, findings indicated an interest in a diversity of modalities and a desire for strong faculty support and expertise (Adeoye, Lynn, 2020).

## Research Questions

**RQ1.** What within African national students' doctoral experiences was motivating and/or rewarding?

**RQ2.** What common challenges did these students/alumni face throughout their doctoral experience?

**RQ3.** What factors/experiences support African national students' learning?

## Participants

The entire continent could not be classified as one; therefore, a sample of African national students at Walden University participated in this study, but Nigeria appears to have the highest number of participants: Nigeria (8) Ghana (2), South Africa (1), Kenya (2), and Uganda (2).

Six current doctoral students and 9 graduates were recruited through the contact option on Walden student and alumni surveys.

## Procedures

Data were collected interviews gathered telephone by the principal investigator (an African national contributing faculty member).

An interview guide was used that included 21 questions and relevant probes in order to best inform the research questions..

## Analysis

Data were analyzed inductively using multi-level coding.

- The first level used the In Vivo approach (not to be confused with NVivo software): a meaning- based inductive approach.
- For the second level coding, interviews were further categorized and collapsed within this system.

A total of 199 individual codes were applied across the interviews.

# Findings

The 199 individual codes were applied across the interviews that fit within the following initial categories:

- Challenges, Initial Experiences, Supporting Learning, Additional Support Suggestions, Reason for PhD, Motivators, Learning Preferences

Further, these codes aligned within the following broader categories

- Rewarding/Motivational Factors, Challenges in the Doctoral Experience, Learning Preferences, Supporting Learning and Success, Suggestions/Opportunities

## **Broad Summary of Findings/Themes**

Common trends in findings include the following

- Need for better financial assistance options for African students
- More consistent technology access within Africa
- targeted support from the university (virtual and in person)
- Learning preferences identified were spread across a variety of modalities.
- Specific aspects of the academic residency experience were identified as essential for progress and completion. **Helpful chair** was most commonly coded as a factor in success.
- Participants also provided several recommendations to support international students' success.

# Interpretation

Findings indicate that students have a passion and dedication to pursue and complete their doctorate for personal, community and career reasons.

## Big take-aways from these interviews are

- Students highly value their education and feel a great sense of accomplishment in completion
- Students truly value their learning experience and success along the way
- Students take advantage of resources and are often resilient and persistent to overcome obstacles
- Technical/internet challenges can be substantial within continental Africa and interfere with deadlines and expectations
- Obtaining visas for residency is a significant challenge that requires extreme persistence to secure
- Financial challenges are a major obstacle and stressor. Students are aware of the discrepancy in how US education is supported vs. international and would like more support
- Students would greatly appreciate dedicated support and, potentially, African-based in person residencies and access to support services/faculty/staff within Africa



## Limitation

The inability to ensure that all other countries in Africa continent were represented.

Majority of responding students from College of Management and Technology rather than an even distribution across colleges.

## Recommendations

Merging findings with research on the educational needs in continental Africa,

Enhanced resources (virtual and on-site) for African national students

Africa-based partnerships for support and resources for students

Financial incentives and scholarships for African students

## Social Change Implications

To bridge critical educational gaps in developing countries. This could also yield positive social change by increasing international enrollment and benefiting the global economy through generating more university graduates globally.



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