

**A STUDY OF THE CANADIAN STUDENT VISA APPLICATION EXPERIENCE OF
NIGERIAN INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS IN CANADA.**

By

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Abstract

This study explores the student visa application experiences of Nigerian international graduate students at the University of Manitoba and addresses the research question: how do Nigerian international graduate students at the University of Manitoba perceive the Canadian student visa application process based on their experiences? The purpose of this research is to increase awareness of the visa application challenges and concerns of Nigerian international graduate students applying to study in Canada—with the intention of informing future policy and research.

This study uses Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to examine the effect of the bureaucratic structure (Canada's visa system) on individual student agency, as evident in how individuals' goals are modified to fit within the structural requirements. Critical Race theory is also used to examine how racism and its various intersections affect student visa requirements and outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine Nigerian international graduate students at the University of Manitoba, each of whom had applied for a Canadian student visa from Nigeria using a Nigerian passport.

Three sub-themes related to the bureaucratic complexity of the visa application process emerged from the interview data: “life on hold” (the process was laborious with no definite timeline regarding how long the wait for a decision would be, which resulted in life delays, stress and emotional turmoil); “social networks and social capital” (students commented on the importance of peer groups and online sources in navigating the visa process); and “discrimination” (students discussed the influence of race and other intersecting forms of discrimination on visa outcomes). Several recommendations and future research directions are also discussed.

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I would also like to appreciate the University of Manitoba Nigerian Students' Association (UNMISA) for their assistance in recruiting graduate students for my research. I'm also grateful to the nine students who decided to take part in my research, and formed a major part of the research outcome.

Above all, my utmost appreciation to God Almighty who saw me through this phase.

Dedication

This research is dedicated to all the Nigerian international students who had the dream to study in Canada but had their visas refused.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Dedication	iv
CHAPTER ONE	1
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background and Context	1
1.2 Research Aims and Objectives	7
1.3 Significance of the Study	8
1.4 Thesis Overview	10
CHAPTER TWO	11
2.0 Introduction	11
2.1 Nigerian Student Migration	11
2.2 Canada as an Attractive Study Destination	13
2.3 International Student Recruitment in Canada (Numbers and Figures)	14
2.3.1 International Students in Manitoba	15
2.3.2 Policies and Programs aimed at International Student Recruitment	17
2.3.3 Importance and Benefits of International Graduate Students in Canada	19
2.4 Student visa/Study Permit	20

2.5 Nigerian International Students’ Visa Challenges and Experiences	22
2.5.1 Differing visa requirements	22
2.5.2 Extended processing times	23
2.5.3 Refusal rates	23
2.5.4 Information sources	25
2.5.5 Students with accompanying family members	25
2.6 Racial stereotypes and bias affecting study permit applications	26
2.7 Gaps in Existing Knowledge	28
2.7 Theoretical Frameworks	30
2.7.1 Structuration Theory	30
2.7.2 Elements of Structuration	31
2.7.4 Critical Race Theory	35
2.7.5 Elements of Critical Race Theory	36
2.7.6 Application of Critical Race Theory to this study	38
CHAPTER THREE	40
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	40
3.0 Introduction	40
3.1 Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry	40
3.2 Study Area and Participants	40
3.3 Participant Selection	41

3.3.1 Brief description of each participant interviewed	41
3.4 Data Sources and Data Collection Strategies	44
3.4.1 Data sources	44
3.4.2 Data collection strategy	44
3.5 Ethical Considerations, Reflexivity and Rigour	46
3.5.1 Ethical considerations	46
3.5.2 Reflexivity	46
3.5.3 Rigour	47
3.6 Data Analysis	48
CHAPTER FOUR	50
FINDINGS	50
4.0 Introduction	50
4.2 Lives on Hold	51
4.2.1 Extensive Documentation	51
4.2.2 Prolonged Waiting/ Processing Time	57
4.1.3 Emotional Stress	65
4.2 Social Networks and Capital.	69
4.2.1 Going beyond the information provided by IRCC	71
4.2.3 Information from immigration agents/consultants	72
4.2.4 Lack of support from the University	73

4.3 Discrimination	77
4.3.1 Racial Discrimination	77
4.3.2 The intersection of other student characteristics and the visa process	79
CHAPTER FIVE	82
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	82
5.0 Introduction	82
5.1 Discussion	82
5.2 Application of findings with the theoretical framework	83
5.2.1 Application of structuration theory to the research findings	83
5.2.2 Application of Critical Race Theory to the research findings.	86
5.3 Contribution to our Knowledge	87
5.4 Policy Implications/Recommendations from the Study	94
5.5 Study Limitations	98
5.6 Future Research Directions	99
REFERENCES	102
APPENDIX I: Student Visa Process in Canada (study permit duration, cost, processing time)	111
APPENDIX II: Interview Guide	118
APPENDIX III: Ethics Approval Letter	121
Appendix V: UNIMISA Letter	126

Appendix VI: Recruitment Poster 127

LIST OF TABLE

Table 1.1 Comparison between the top sending countries for University bound international students at the University of Manitoba and Canada-wide..... 5

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Top ten host countries of international students in 2019.	3
Figure 2.1 International students' destination province in Canada (2021)	15
Figure 2.2 International students' source country at the University of Manitoba ...	17
Figure 2.3 Relationship between Structure, Actions and Agency	31

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

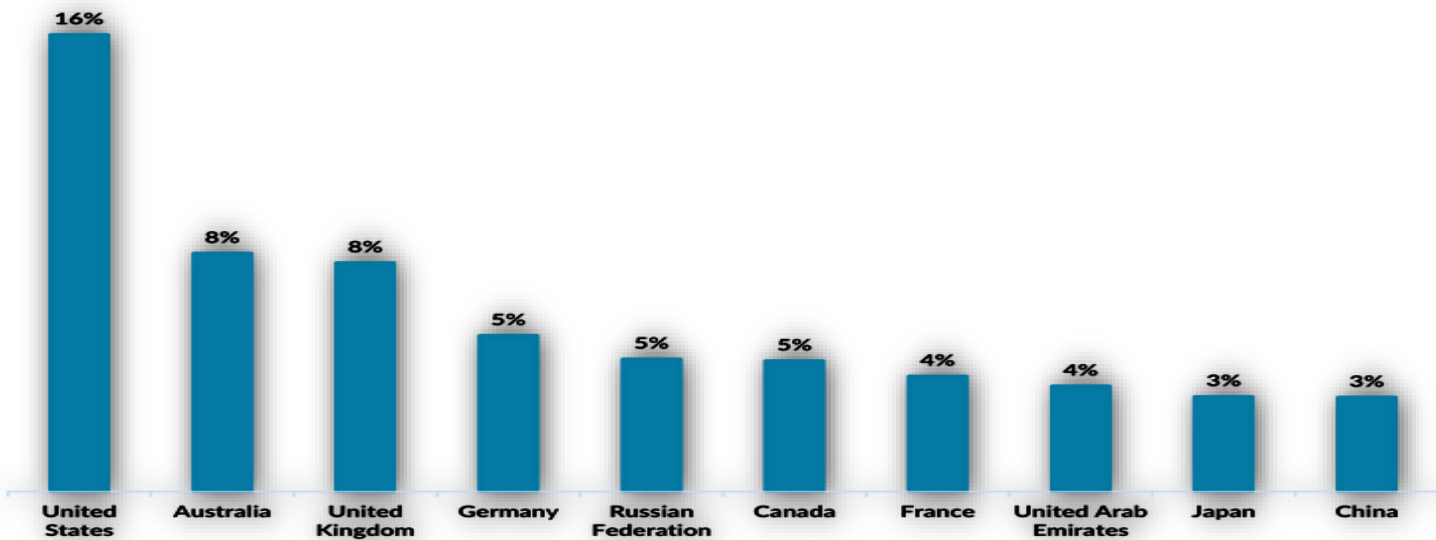
Owing to international trade and migration, there has been widespread global interest in international education with increasing enrollment of students from other parts of the world in universities in western and technocratic nations (Johnstone & Lee, 2017). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) approximately 5 million students participate in foreign education, leaving their home countries to pursue higher education (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007) and the numbers are increasing. By 2019, approximately 6.1 million students were studying outside their countries of origin (Batalova, 2022). International study promotes intercultural learning, networking, and social and cultural relations across the world with several economic benefits for host institutions and nations (Waters, 2012; Scott et al, 2015). The Institute of International Education (IIE) describes studying abroad as one of the means for students to develop international experience and skills necessary to address global concerns in a global world. (Institute of International Education, 2015).

Studying abroad also has positive impacts on students' personal, academic and professional lives, as international students have enhanced employability both in their home country and the host country, better prospects for career progression and promotion, marketable and valuable skill set, and increased maturity and level of confidence (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017). According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), Canada is a popular choice for international students because of the perceived high quality of the Canadian educational sector as well as its reputation as a multicultural and tolerant society, and clear immigration pathway (El- Assal, 2020). International student recruitment and enrollment has become a pillar of many Canadian

institutions' strategic plans, with mutual benefits accruing to students and institutions, and to the Canadian government (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; ICEF Monitor, 2023a). International students obtain an internationally valuable education and gain opportunities for permanent residency, institutions benefit from increased enrolments, tuition revenue, diversity, networks for international relations, and contacts for recruitment and alumni projects. The receiving countries also experience significant benefits from hosting international students. Canada benefits from international students' diverse skills, tax revenue, population growth and soft power (Brunner, 2022). International students also serve as a resource for skilled workers and potential skilled permanent residents in Canada which supports economic development. (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Brunner, 2022). Canadian-born students and host society members benefit when they meet and learn about the culture, language, history, religions and other diversity that the international students bring with them.

Canada has hosted international students from 187 countries in the world, making international students the largest temporary migrant group in the country (El-Assal, 2020). As shown in figure 1.1 below, numbers from 2019 reflects that Canada attracts 5% of all international students, making it the 5th largest host country for international students worldwide, after the United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Germany and Russia

Figure 1.1 Top ten host countries of international students in 2019.



Source: UNESCO, Total Inbound Internationally Mobile Students, (2019), accessed December 5th, 2022.

With changes to the international and Canadian political climate, Canada is becoming an increasingly important destination for international students. Foreign student enrolment in Canada grew by 170% over the past decade and 43% over the past five years, such that by the end of 2022 there were 807,750 international students in Canada (ICEF Monitor, 2023a).

Migration methods in modern times have grown far more complex and time-consuming. However, the goals of migration have not changed and are determined by individual desires, which in turn are influenced by perceptions of how one's ambitions might be realized in a location different from one's home country. They are also shaped by the sending country in terms of politics, freedom, economic opportunities, war/conflict, and environmental degradation. (Iseolorunkanmi et al., 2021). Canada is often seen as an attractive destination given that it is widely regarded as a multicultural nation with a high level of racial tolerance, with regard for

inclusion and diversity in the social, economic, and structural institutions, making it attractive to international students from countries like Nigeria (Banjo, 2012).

As noted by Adeyanju and Olatunji (2022), there are predictions that Nigeria has the potential of becoming an increasingly important source of future immigration to Canada for three reasons:

“(1) Nigeria has a large number of highly educated persons who are unemployed due to the country's bad economic situation, (2) Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with an urbane populace eager to migrate, and (3) Nigeria's lingua franca is English, which makes it easier to live in other English-speaking countries like Canada” (Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2022:106).

Also, the population of Nigeria is predominantly young, and when the demographic balance shifts toward young people, there is almost always outmigration. In more general terms, more people worldwide have the means to migrate so that increases the pool of potential migrants, and Canada has a significant number of its permanent population with Nigerian background which also contributes to this phenomenon.

As at the end of 2022, Nigeria represents the 5th largest source country of origin for international students in Canada with 21,660 study permit holders, only after India, China, Philippines, and France (ICEF Monitor, 2023b) Other top source countries include Iran, South Korea, Vietnam, Mexico, and United States (ICEF Monitor, 2023b) When university-bound international students are considered alone, Nigeria maintains its position as the fifth-largest country sending students to Canada in 2022 (CBIE, 2023), and also stands out as the primary source country for international students at the University of Manitoba in the same year (As shown in Table 1.1). These statistics highlights Nigeria’s significant role as a leading source of international students in Canadian universities.

Table 1.1 Comparison between the top sending countries for University bound international students at the University of Manitoba and Canada-wide.

	Top five sending countries for International Students currently studying at the University of Manitoba (University of Manitoba, 2023).	Top five sending countries for University-bound international students in Canada (CBIE, 2023)
1	Nigeria	India
2	China	China
3	India	France
4	Bangladesh	Iran
5	Iran	Nigeria

It is important to note that Nigeria has been among the top five countries for the past five years, but did not become the number one sending country at the University of Manitoba until this year. This may be as a result of some contributing factors such as the decline in English study in China, elimination of IELTS for Nigerians, and Covid-19. So, it possible for this statistics to change or it may not.

Despite the multicultural worldview, tolerance, and equal opportunity proclamations in Canada, and the goal of the federal government is to increase international student enrollment due to their positive contributions to the Canadian economy and labour force, the process of applying for a study visa for student migration has increasingly complicated. Once admitted, newcomers begin to learn that racial discrimination, which affects most international students complicates the initial and long-term integration process (Banjo, 2012). The obstacles to entry, however, are greater for African students. According to Kazeem (2019) there is a significantly higher visa

rejection rate for African study permit applicants, standing at 75%, compared to the global rejection rate of 39% for other applicants. Additionally, applicants from African countries encounter more visa challenges, including delayed processing time, and instances of racial discrimination, as compared to applicants from other continents (Kazeem, 2019). Omotoye (2022) also finds that African applicants applying for a Canadian study visa are subjected to demanding visa application processes, and possible systemic and racial bias structured to work against them.

Gideon Christian, the president of the African Scholars Initiative Canada (ASI-Canada), raised concerns regarding the discriminatory rules and disproportionately high rate of study visa denial for African students during his appearance before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) (ASI, 2022). He argued that racism is a significant factor contributing to the elevated refusal rate, and emphasized that the Canadian visa system is believed to possess elements of racism within its structure (ASI, 2022). This is particularly evident in the admissibility criteria for African applicants, the limited locations and capacity of visa offices in Africa, and the disparity in refusal rates between African students compared to other continents (ASI, 2022).

As a result of the complexities surrounding the Canadian visa system, international students from African countries including Nigeria, have various experiences and perceptions of the Canadian student visa application process. This study uncovers the shared student visa application experiences of Nigerian post-graduate international students at the University of Manitoba. It focuses on highlighting the specific concerns and difficulties faced by students from a developing nation, in this case Nigeria, and raises awareness on how the Canadian visa system permits or constrain Nigerian students to study or not study in Canada (Tavares, 2021).

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

The research question guiding this study is: “How do Nigerian international graduate students at the University of Manitoba perceive the Canadian student visa application process based on their experiences?” This explores the student visa application experiences of international graduate students at the University of Manitoba, and unveils students’ impressions of the Canadian study permit application process, and the influence of student visa policies on Nigerian international students in Canada.

This research explores students’ visa application experiences to create awareness of the challenges and concerns of international graduate students applying for a Canadian student visa from a developing country. The research examines international graduate students’ overall impressions of the Canadian study permit application process in reference to their prior expectations, and their experiences while applying for their visa. Structuration theory provides a lens to understand the effect of the bureaucratic structures, including the rules and resources needed for a study permit application, and how they affect individual student’s personal agency. This theory, as used in Lu’s (2006) research on studying abroad and migration motivations, helps provide an understanding on the role of the enacted structure in enabling or restricting individuals’ ability to access an international education. Critical race theory is also used to explain the possible inequities inherent in the visa system including racial bias and other intersecting forms of discrimination, as well as the importance of social capital in navigating challenging structural constraints.

This research illuminates the structurally imposed rules of the institution such as the rules and requirements for a study permit application, the importance of social networks and capital in satisfying the requirements, and the possible racial discrimination affecting the outcome of a visa

application. This research also presents relevant recommendations and suggestions for future international graduate students, post-secondary institutions, and the IRCC/federal government.

1.3 Significance of the Study

It is important to understand why it is relevant to study the student visa application experiences of international graduate students, and why this research focuses on Nigerian international graduate students in Canada.

As noted previously, growing numbers of international students are coming to Canada in pursuit of the various personal, academic and professional benefits of Canadian university credentials. In Canada, students who are not Canadian citizens or permanent residents are required to obtain a study permit to study. A study permit is a document issued by Canadian Immigration to allow foreign nationals study at a designated learning institution in Canada (IRCC, 2022a). Study permits are applied for and have a processing time based on the country from which the student is applying. In this thesis, the terms ‘study permit’ and ‘student visa’ would be used interchangeably while denoting the same concept.

During the process of submitting my study permit application in Nigeria, I became anecdotally aware of the onerous process international students in Nigeria had to endure to obtain a Canadian study permit. From my informal interactions with other Nigerian students during my application process, I learned about the various obstacles they encountered as well. Although some students reported a fairly unproblematic experience with their study permit application process, a number of others reported having to deal with visa denials and several reapplications (up to four times). Some students had to pay high fees to immigration lawyers for judicial reviews before getting their study permits; some had to change their country of study because of visa delays or denials; others had to give up on their dreams to get an international education. This piqued my

interest in considering the experience and concerns of international students applying for a Canadian student visa from a developing country.

This research focuses on Nigerian international graduate students because graduate students' applications tend to be less straightforward than undergraduate or diploma applications. Graduate applications include applicants who are more mature and older, who are perceived to be using the study pathway for a permanent means of migration, applicants who want to migrate with their immediate family members (spouse and/or children), applicants who are self-sponsored and may not be able to secure the required funds, and applicants with study gaps who cannot prove they have a genuine interest in studying nor intent to return to their home countries after studying (Doyle et al, 2016). In this research I chose to focus on Canada because there have been relatively few studies looking at the student visa application experiences of students from developing nations coming to Canada, particularly Nigerian students, and on how student visa procedures might or might not affect the desire of students' from developing countries to receive foreign education.

This research also uses University of Manitoba as the study area because the University of Manitoba has a large population of Nigerian international students, which is fueled by the affordable tuition fee of the institution, high population of Nigerian permanent population in the province, and the reasonable cost of living for students schooling in the province.

In sum, this research is relevant and timely as international education and student migration keep growing in prevalence and more students from countries like Nigeria continue applying for study permits every year. Similarly, international students are important to Canada's economy and prosperity (Global Affairs Canada, 2020), and increasing international students' enrolments are a major part of many universities' recruitment strategies, which helps build global reputation and generate revenue from tuition fees (Calder et al., 2016). Also, there have been limited studies on

the visa experiences and challenges of international graduate students migrating to Canada (Calder et al, 2016).

1.4 Thesis Overview

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter two reviews relevant literature on Nigerian student education migration, Canada as an attractive study destination for international students, the benefits of international students in Canada, international students' visa challenges and experiences and the gaps in existing literatures, and explanations of structuration and critical race theory in relation to this study.

Chapter three describes the research method, which includes the research tools and procedures that were used in this study, the rationale for using qualitative inquiry, the study area and participant selection criteria, and the data collection and analysis strategies, as well as various ethical considerations.

Chapter four presents the results and findings from the research, as well as the comprehensive descriptions of themes generated. Finally, chapter five includes discussions and interpretations of the findings with respect to the existing literature, the theoretical framework and the research question, followed by conclusions and recommendations, study limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a background to the study by reviewing previous literature relating to this area of research, and describes the theoretical framework used in this research. This includes the existing literature on Nigerian student migration, relevant statistics, funding and policies that aid international student recruitment to Canada; challenges faced during the application process including racism and discrimination, and the gaps in existing studies. Giddens' (1984) agency and structuration theory is employed to show how structures and the rules and regulations imposed by these structures affect students' human agency, while Critical Race Theory is used to analyze racial discrimination within the structures and the importance of social capital and networks in maneuvering the structural rules and regulations.

2.1 Nigerian Student Migration

In general, wealthy nations have seen a growth in the number of foreign students arriving to complete their studies abroad. Students from developing nations continue to travel in increasing numbers to more developed western countries, such as Canada, to seek degrees in a variety of fields (Raji, 2019). Globalization and rapid technical improvements in industrialized nations are key factors in the growing international mobility of students (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2006). International migration has grown steadily in the era of globalization, which has compelled many individuals from developing nations like Nigeria to move to the world's developed economies (Banjo, 2012).

When educational conditions are uneven and unequally distributed in the sending country,

usually a developing country, developing nations encourage their students to study abroad by offering various scholarship programs (Raji, 2019). Nigeria is not immune to the study abroad trend, and as the most populous country in Africa with over 200 million inhabitants it represents a large potential source of students for the international education market, including Canada (Raji, 2019). Over 100,000 Nigerian students were enrolled abroad in 2020 (ICEF Monitor, 2021). According to a report from the central bank of Nigeria in 2012, Nigerians spend over 1 billion USD annually on foreign education (CBN, 2012; Umar, 2014). This growing trend among Nigerian students is attributed to the opportunities associated with studying abroad, the lack of proper infrastructure and government funding in Nigerian post-secondary institutions, persistent industrial disputes such as strikes, extended academic programmes, and lower quality of education compared to western countries (Umar, 2014; Raji, 2019; Iseolorunkanmi et al., 2021; Abiodun, 2021). Other contributing factors such as poor labour market opportunities in Nigeria have also been recognized by researchers as contributing to the trend in student mobility toward greener educational pastures (Raji, 2019).

As a result, several programs have been developed in Nigeria to aid students who intend to study abroad. Notably, government-sponsored programs such as the Federal Scholarship Board (FSB) and Petroleum Technology Development Fund (PTDF) scholarships have been established to assist students (mostly graduate students) in studying abroad (Raji, 2019). In many cases, these programs require students to sign a bond to guarantee their return to serve the nation and contribute to the national development after completing their studies (Raji, 2019). Also, programmes from international organizations such as Shell and MasterCard scholarships, and other programmes sponsored by wealthy and prominent individuals, help Nigerian graduate students study abroad (Umar, 2014; Raji, 2019). The UK is reported as the most common study destination for Nigerians,

other popular destination countries include the United States, Australia, France, Canada and Germany (Umar, 2014).

2.2 Canada as an Attractive Study Destination

It is common for people from developing nations to seek an international education in developed nations because of the better opportunities. Canada, for example receives hundreds of thousands of international students yearly, due to factors such as its stable economy, educational standard, good living conditions, better career prospects and security (Gorgoshidze, 2010). Canada is renowned as a multicultural and diverse society, attracting not only students but also skilled migrants from various parts of the world.

Canada provides several scholarships and financial aid programs that can help to support students coming to study in the country. In addition, the Canadian student visa permits students to work part time while studying, which allows students to earn additional income to support themselves (Schwartz, 2021). Canada's bilingualism also provides opportunities for international students to engage in various cultures and study in two languages (Schwartz, 2021). Canada also provides several options for international students upon graduation such as obtaining a post-graduate work permit, international work experience programs, or finding permanent employment in the Canadian labour market (Schwartz, 2021). International students are able to develop their career prospects, as Canada provides job opportunities for students who wish to pursue careers in their field of study after graduation (Schwartz, 2021).

In addition, Manitoba is an attractive destination for international students, as a result of the affordable cost of living, including housing and transportation which are cheaper compared to other provinces. Also, Manitoba international tuition fees are one of the cheapest in Canada. Another big draw is the Manitoba Provincial Nomination Program (MPNP) that allows a rather

seamless transition into permanent residency compared with other provinces (Manitoba Government, 2016).

In sum, Canada is an attractive destination because, in addition to getting an education, Canada offers additional incentives for international students, such as a enjoying an excellent quality of life, gaining a world class education which would give an edge in the labour market, working while studying, gaining work experience after studying with an opportunity for a post graduate work permit, and having an enriching cultural experience (National Bank of Canada, 2019).

2.3 International Student Recruitment in Canada (Numbers and Figures)

International students are described as students on a temporary visa, studying and living in a country different from their country of origin (Doyle et al., 2016). They are ‘non-Canadian students who have had to obtain the authorization of the Canadian government to enter Canada with the intention of pursuing an education’ (Kim & Kwak, 2019:26).

Canada is an active participant in international student recruitment and receives students from 187 countries (Kim & Kwak, 2019). Data from 2021 shows that International students represents 17.1% of the total university enrolment in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2021). Students studying at the non-university postsecondary level compose the largest portion of international students in Canada, followed by those at the post-graduate level (master’s and doctorate level), and those at the bachelor’s level (Crossman et al., 2021).

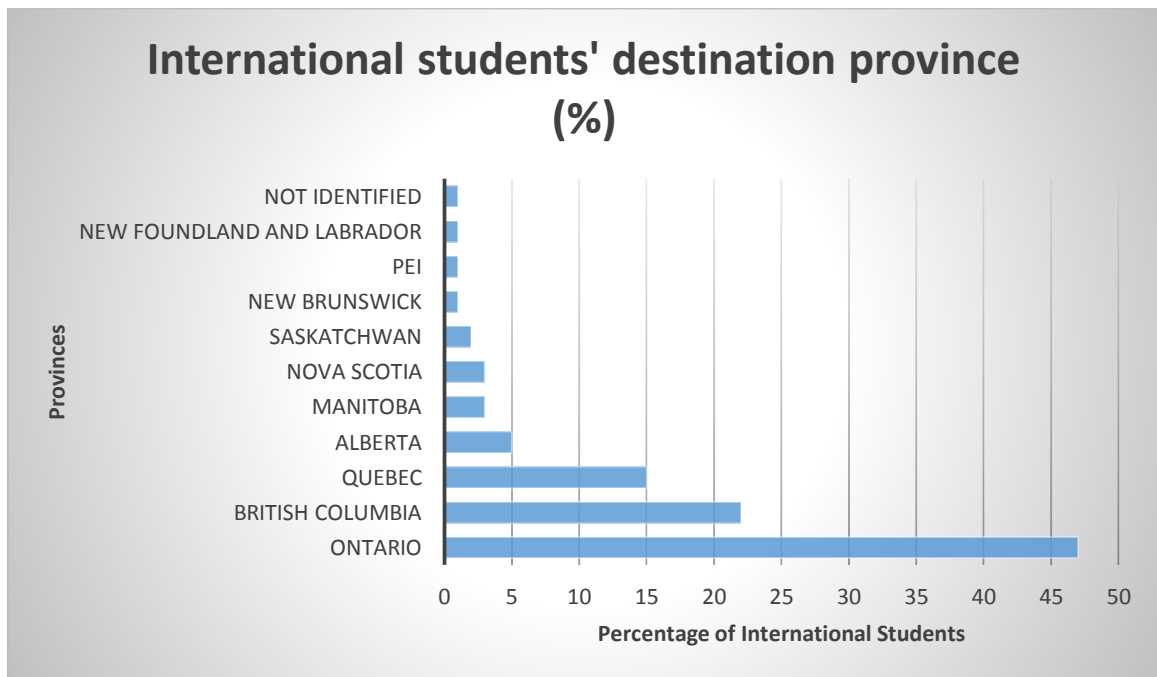
There has been a 135% increase in international student’s enrolments in Canada over the past decade (CBIE, 2023). In 2016, international students in Canada spent \$16.6 billion in tuition fees, living expenses and other costs, this rose to \$21.6 billion in 2018. Recognizing the growing

economic impact of international students, in 2019 Canada allocated \$147.9 million for the next five years, in collaboration with provinces and institutions, to drive the new International Education Strategy (Government of Canada, 2019).

2.3.1 International Students in Manitoba

In 2021 Manitoba was the fifth most popular destination province for international students, hosting approximately 3% of the total international student population in Canada (CBIE, 2021) (See figure 2.1 below). This ranking places Manitoba after Ontario (47%), British Columbia (22%), Quebec (15%), and Alberta (5%), which are the leading provinces in terms of hosting international students (CBIE, 2023).

Figure 2.1 International students' destination province in Canada (2021)



Source: Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2023

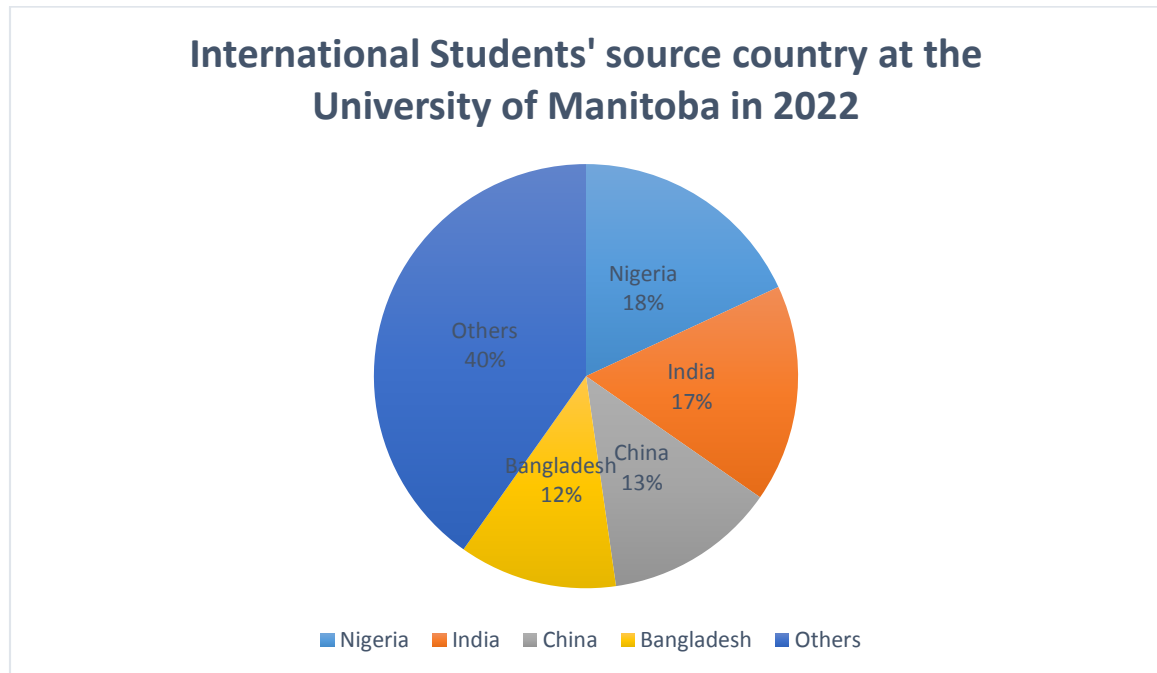
The Government of Manitoba in partnership with the Manitoba Council for International Education (MCIE) and institutions, work to develop the international education sector and to

increase international student recruitment (Manitoba Government, 2016). In 2019, the Manitoba Minister of Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration recognized the position of Manitoba as a destination choice for international students, and noted that international education is valuable to the province's economic growth (Government of Canada, 2019; Browning & Elnagar, 2022). MCIE describes Manitoba as an ideal location for international students, because of its provision of a safe and affordable environment, great research facilities, internationally recognized programs, scholarships and low tuition fee compared with other provinces in Canada (MCIE, 2022). Every year, over 19,000 international students are welcomed in Manitoba from 80 countries (MCIE, 2022).

In 2016, 12,932 international students studied in Manitoba, which was a 12% increase from the previous year (Manitoba Government, 2016). University enrollment accounted for 8,808, and 2,092 students were enrolled in Colleges (Manitoba Government, 2016). The University of Manitoba had the highest post-secondary international student enrollment in Manitoba, accounting for 49.6% of the total international student enrolment in Manitoba (Manitoba Government, 2016). The tuition fees generated from all international students in the same year amounted to \$112.01M, and when living expenses and other costs are included, international students spent over \$200M (Manitoba Government, 2016). As a source of post-secondary students in Manitoba, Nigeria at 27% is second only to China at 31% (Manitoba Government, 2016).

As at November, 2022 the total number of students at the University of Manitoba was 29,788, and 6,601 (22%) of these were international students (University of Manitoba, 2023). As displayed in Figure 2.2, Nigeria (18%) is the largest source country for international students at the University of Manitoba (University of Manitoba, 2023).

Figure 2.2 International students' source country at the University of Manitoba



Source: University of Manitoba Institutional Analysis, 2023.

2.3.2 Policies and Programs aimed at International Student Recruitment

Trilokekar and El Masri (2020) note that the in-flow of international student to Canada has been influenced by the policies and actions of various levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions. International students represent a vulnerable group, and their study plans are shaped by the policies implemented in Canada (Doyle et al., 2016). To increase international students' enrolment in Canada, the government is committed to making Canada an international education destination, and has developed core public policies and programs that aid international student recruitment and retention (Browning & Elnagar, 2022). This has helped the number of foreign students studying in Canada double between 2010 and 2020 (Casteneda & Triandafylidou, 2022).

The Canadian government increasingly wants international graduates to remain in the

country and have introduced new legislation to encourage them to stay. In 2006 the Post Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) was introduced as a new immigration policy to enable international students to remain and work in Canada for up to 3 years upon graduation (Scott et al., 2015). International students are a priority group encouraged to apply for Permanent Residence (PR) and citizenship (Scott et al., 2015). In 2008, the Canadian Experience Class was introduced which is a separate pathway to facilitate international graduate PR applications after working for a year in Canada. This was a means to encourage more international students to consider Canada a preferred study destination (Scott et al., 2015).

The Study Direct Stream (SDS) is another program that helps recruit international students. The SDS is an expedited visa program, reducing the student visa processing time to 20 days for legal residents of Antigua and Barbuda, Brazil, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, India, Morocco, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago and Vietnam (IRCC, 2019). The SDS requires students to prove students have sufficient funds to cover living expenses with a Guaranteed Investment Certificate (GIC) of at least CAN\$10,000, proof of first year tuition payment, language test results, upfront medical examination certificates and police certificates (IRCC, 2019). This program made it easier for international students from these countries to enter Canada as study permit holders (IRCC, 2019). Nigeria is not included among the SDS countries, instead a different expedited visa program known as the Nigerian Student Express (NSE) was created, although it is no longer in operation as at the time this thesis was written (See Appendix I for details of the NSE).

The most significant policy in this area is the International Education Strategy (IES), was released by the Government of Canada in October of 2019. The strategy aims to increase the number of international students by providing more supports to international students, addressing

challenges of international student recruitment, promoting international education, and launching partnerships between governments and institutions (Global Affairs Canada, 2020). Key measures as specified in the IES include the International Student Program (ISP), which provides specialized services to help international students settle in Canada; the Top-Up scholarship program, providing additional financial aid to international students; and the International Student Success Strategy, which supports community and intercultural learning among international students in Canada (Global Affairs Canada, 2020).

Manitoba also has international education policies that aid international education and the recruitment of international students (Elnagar & Young, 2021). These were analyzed as five dimensions of Manitoba International Education Strategy (2009-2013): recruiting international students, international education projects and contracts, offshore education and partnerships, and mobility of domestic students and staff (Elnagar & Young, 2021:86). In 2013, the NDP government introduced ‘The International Education Act’ which specified standards of practices for educational providers and education agents in the province (Elnagar & Young, 2021).

2.3.3 Importance and Benefits of International Graduate Students in Canada

Canada’s international education strategy links the recruitment of international students and the retention of skilled workers to help develop the domestic economy (Scott et al., 2015). International education serves as a source for skilled labour and integration into the local labour market (Scott et al., 2015). It has become a competitive industry that serves economic benefits, improves international and cross-cultural relations, and provides valuable human resources (Knight, 2004; Scott et al., 2015).

International student recruitment is key to Canada’s economic growth and prosperity and generates billions of dollars that make up a significant portion of the country’s GDP (Hari et al.,

2021). International students in Canada constitute a significant source of future economic growth that will bring about notable economic advantages to every Canadian region (Government of Canada, 2012).

International students help fill Canada's skilled labour shortage, as international students serve as a pool for recruiting highly qualified and skilled individuals who meet the market demands (Government of Canada, 2012). International graduate students travel from their country of origin to a host country to pursue advanced education both for increasing their knowledge and for professional advancement, and they serve as ambassadors of Canadian education, bringing in academic, economic and cultural benefits to the Canadian learning environment (Chen, 2006). Nations and institutions are able to develop geopolitical links, and economic alliances, through collaborative research and international education programmes (Knight, 2004). International graduate students also contribute significantly to innovation and knowledge development. Finally, they are a source of cultural creativity, particularly in less diverse areas, helping students get exposed to new ideas, cultures, advanced levels of information, and the latest scientific and technological developments (Belkhodja & Esses, 2013; Quain, 2018).

2.4 Student visa/Study Permit

The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2001) empowers the immigration minister to establish statutory immigration policies such as visa application eligibility requirements, to limit the number of applications for specific visas per year, and to set processing priorities for each type of visa (study, work, refugee, residency) (Satzewich, 2015). Over the years, multiple regulations have been introduced to determine who applies for a visa and how an application is processed, which, in turn, have made Canada's immigration system more complex and dynamic (Satzewich,

2015). The Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) is in charge of implementing visa policies and handling the visa application process.

International students, upon getting admission into a school, college or university in Canada, must obtain a study permit before they arrive (Satzewich, 2015). According to IRCC (2022a), a study permit is a document issued to foreign nationals (individuals who are not citizens or permanent residents of Canada), to study in a Designated Learning Institution (DLI) in Canada. It is not a visa, and students from Nigeria would still require a visa, which would also be issued when the study permit is approved. It requires an application fee of 150 CAD, a biometrics fee of 85 CAD, and other fees for medical examination and police certificate depending on the country you are applying from (IRCC, 2022a). Students must show an admission letter from a DLI, financial documents to prove they have sufficient funds to cover their tuition and living expenses for themselves and any accompanying family members (Satzewich, 2015; House of Commons, 2022). They must also satisfy the visa officer that they will return to their country of origin at the end of their authorized stay (Satzewich, 2015).

Student visa applications are subjected to different eligibility criteria, conditions of stay and application procedures, based on the country of origin and country of application submission (Satzewich, 2015). Satzewich (2015) noted important factors that determine the outcome of a visa application, such as an individual's background, the reason for travelling, and documents used to support the application. The immigration system is highly bureaucratized with heavy rules and procedures and no two visa applications are the same, so it is problematic for visa officers to use the same rules and techniques in their decision-making procedure. Hence flexibility in the application of rules is necessary and it is expected for the visa officers to use their discretion in accordance to the rules for some unique cases (Satzewich, 2015). Plamondon et al. (2022) similarly

noted that there is an inconsistency to IRCC as the bureaucracy operates a convoluted decision-making process that makes it difficult to predict outcomes or advise applicants. (See Appendix 1 on applying for a Canada study permit from Nigeria, including documents and fees required).

2.5 Nigerian International Students' Visa Challenges and Experiences

Although international students are seen as economically important in Canada and as a large source for labour recruitment, international students, particularly African students, are faced with several challenges within the visa system. The next session discusses many of these experiences in greater detail.

2.5.1 Differing visa requirements

Khanal and Gaulee (2019) found that preparing visa documents and providing the required finances (tuition and living expenses) were major pre-departure challenges for international students. The House of Commons committee on citizenship and immigration in Canada released a report in May 2022, which examines the recruitment of international students and understanding the realities of the visa system, such as high refusal rates and increased processing time (House of Commons, 2022). The report stated that the Nigerian Student Express (NSE) requires students to complete English language proficiency testing even though English is the official language of Nigeria, and that the financial requirement of 30,000 CAD for living expenses was three times more than what was required for students from the Study Direct Stream (SDS) countries such as China and India (House of Commons, 2022). In total, a Nigerian applicant will need an average of 43,000 CAD to show proof of funds (tuition and living expenses) with this process. Even so, NSE applicants that met the requirements often still had their visas delayed or refused (House of Commons, 2022). Gideon Christian, president of the African Scholars Initiative, criticized the much higher financial and language requirements for NSE as unfair, he attributed

these differences to project stereotypes and racism, and contended that the requirements for NSE should be consistent with other expedited visa programs. The report also noted that the NSE was not available on the IRCC website as at May 2022, when the session was held (House of Commons, 2022), and it remained so as at the time this thesis was written.

2.5.2 Extended processing times

The COVID-19 pandemic had effects on international student's enrolment, restricting international travel controls, extending processing times and causing uncertainty in visa applications (CBIE, 2021). The House of Commons report also revealed that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, an average study permit took 102 days to be processed, which was a 300% increase in the length of processing time, from the average of 38 days before the pandemic (as at the end of 2019) (House of Commons, 2022). The report also recorded that student visa applications from Nigeria had an increased delay of up to 30 weeks at the peak of the pandemic. During the pandemic, IRCC experienced increased visa application backlogs which affected students arriving in Canada. As of September, 2022 there were 2.6 million people in the IRCC queue, which resulted in a significant processing delay of study permits affecting students study plans to come to Canada (Singer, 2023).

2.5.3 Refusal rates

The House of Commons report revealed that IRCC study permit refusal rate rose from 31% in 2016 to 49% in 2020 (House of Commons, 2022). Students from African countries reported higher refusal rates compared to students from other parts of the world, indicating students' country of origin as a determinant of visa application outcomes (House of Commons, 2022:18). In 2021, African countries reported higher refusal rates compared to other parts of the world. Elevated refusal rates were reported for South Sudan (100% refusal), Liberia (94% refusal), Sierra Leone

(92% refusal), Ethiopia (88% refusal), Somalia (80% refusal), Ghana (82 % refusal), and Nigeria (65% refusal), among others (House of Commons, 2022:41). On an average, more than 70% of the study visas processed in African countries are refused, compared to countries such as the United Kingdom and United States with 11% and 13% refusal rates respectively (House of Commons, 2022). A report from CBIE (2021) noted that students from the same countries had similar study permit experiences, and students from countries with established records as enrolment source countries (such as SDS countries) with Canada institutions had fewer issues obtaining their study permit (CBIE, 2021). This has resulted in a notable concentration of international students from specific countries in Canada, therefore impeding the desired diversification of the international student source countries in Canada. For instance, as of 2022 India alone constitutes 41% of the entire international student population in Canada, while India, China and the Philippines combined, accounts for 55.1% of all international students in Canada (Singer, 2023).

The new International Education Strategy (IES) spanning from 2019-2024, launched by the Minister of International Trade Diversification, in association with Employment and Social Development Canada and IRCC, acknowledges international education as an essential pillar of Canada's long-term development (Government of Canada, 2019). The IES seeks to increase international student enrolments in Canada and to maintain global rankings by: diversifying the source countries from which international students are recruited; diversifying the locations of study within Canada to increase the concentration of international students in smaller cities, as well as increasing support for the Canadian education sector by supporting institutions across the provinces to ensure the equitable growth of Canada's international education sector nation-wide (Government of Canada, 2019). In line with the International Education Strategy, El Assal (2019)

recommended the diversification of source countries for Canada's international students, as it would help develop international relations and economic and social ties with other parts of the world.

Reasons for study permit refusal include both the limited funding and capacity of visa offices in particular regions such as Africa, which in turn causes visa officers to make decisions without thoroughly assessing applications, including students failing to convince visa officers that they will return to their home country at the end of an authorized stay (House of Commons, 2022). Students are able to prove this with a detailed statement of purpose explaining their detailed study plan, their ties to their country (such as family and landed property) and travel history (House of Commons, 2022). Students can also be refused their visa if they are unable to prove that they have the adequate finances to study in Canada without needing to work (House of Commons, 2022). Other reasons for visa refusal according to IRCC are grounds for inadmissibility such as criminality, misrepresentation, human or international rights violations, health, inadmissible family member, amongst others (IRCC, 2022b).

2.5.4 Information sources

Another challenge for international students is getting relevant and useful information resources on how to navigate the visa process. According to a CBIE (2021) report, students considered institutional websites, recommendations from peer networks, and social media sources, while IRCC agents and government departments in their home country were the least common sources of information (CBIE, 2021).

2.5.5 Students with accompanying family members

Doyle et al. (2016) notes that studies often overlook international students with accompanying spouse and/or children, considering the lack of data and research on student parents

and their peculiar challenges and experiences. International students with accompanying family members who are mostly post-graduate students face additional pre-arrival barriers such as immigration policies affecting the visas of the accompanying spouse or children (Doyle et al., 2016). Doyle et al. (2016) further revealed that immigration policies could restrict students' partners or children's access to visas, which could further influence their decision making for choice of country of study or delay their study plans.

2.6 Racial stereotypes and bias affecting study permit applications

Sue et al. (2007: 271) note that “racism is one of the most divisive forces in our society and is so deeply ingrained that it is nearly invincible”. When interactions occur between individuals who differ in race and culture, there are possibilities for unintentional racial bias occurring as a result of inbuilt stereotypes; these are often subtle, indirect and unintentional (Sue et al., 2007: 278). Satzewich (2015) revealed that although visa officers record their decision-making processes in individual files in the Global Case Management System (GCMS) case notes, visa outcomes and credibility are influenced by the prejudice and racial stereotypes harboured by visa officers, making visible minorities subjects of racial discrimination.

In 2021, IRCC released a report on the study of racism in the department, which was generated from focus group discussions among 54 employees from across IRCC. The study revealed the presence of unintentional stereotypes, micro-aggressions and subtle racism exhibited by IRCC employees, which has the possibility of influencing visa decisions and outcomes (IRCC, 2021). More specifically, the employees in this study gave instances of the presence of internalized stereotypes, such as regarding Nigerians as “corrupt and untrustworthy” (IRCC, 2021:11). Additionally, the employees disclosed that the evident presence of both overt and subtle racism among IRCC employees and decision makers resulted in the establishment of discriminatory

policies in the visa application process (IRCC, 2021). An illustrative instance of such discrimination was the imposition of additional financial documentation requirement, exclusively for Nigerian applicants (IRCC, 2021). Also, the high success rate of students who contested their visa refusals in federal court indicated that IRCC denied visas in a subjective or even discriminatory manner (IRCC, 2021:58). This has also led to students accumulating extra costs of up to \$8,000 in legal fees in challenging unreasonable refusal decisions in the federal court (ASI, 2022).

The IRCC 2021 study also reported that the presence of racism within the IRCC workplace could reflect on the decision-making process of the visa officers, these include race-based discrimination in the hiring process in the department, limited promotion of racialized employees to higher levels of the organization which created an imbalance in racial representation among the management, and the lack of consequences for racist behaviours at IRCC (IRCC, 2021).

Satzewich (2015) also outlined that the administrative structure of the IRCC department raises concerns regarding the claims of racial and other forms of discrimination within the system. For instance, there is an unequal distribution of visa offices, with a higher concentration in Europe and the United States, despite the majority of visa applications originating from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean (Satzewich, 2015: 34). As a result, this facilitates the application process for individuals in Europe and the United States. Similarly, the House of Commons (2022) report revealed that there were limited and underserviced visa application centres in Africa, requiring most visa applicants to travel long distances to give biometrics and submit the required paperwork to apply for a study permit (House of Commons, 2022: 71). Visa offices in this region were thus faced with high volumes of applications requiring prompt decisions, without sufficient time and

resources for thorough analysis, consequently resulting in high rates of visa applications being denied (House of Commons, 2022: 72).

2.7 Gaps in Existing Knowledge

In order to understand the gaps in the existing knowledge on the topic, it is important to understand the previous literature relating to international education and immigration, and what studies have previously been conducted.

Khanal and Gaulee (2019) conducted a review of a number of studies in the United States examining the challenges international students face when attempting to go abroad to study. Challenges faced by international students were categorized into pre-departure, post-departure and post-study. Challenges faced by international students before departure include obtaining accurate information, understanding the admission process and preparing necessary documents for visa acquisition (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). There have also been studies focusing on the challenges to transition and adjustment to the culture of the host nation. For example, Boateng (2022) conducted a study on international students in Canada, documenting the challenges they faced while adjusting to the Canadian culture, and the supports they required. Some of the challenges outlined includes learning to layer clothing and accessories during winter, getting familiar with the public transport system, and securing accommodation (Boateng, 2022).

Any such studies involving Nigerian international students have focused primarily on students adjusting to the cultures of the host countries and navigating the academic life (Ukomadu, 2010). These studies tends to overlook concerns some Nigerian international students face during the student visa application process, and how it could also impact their educational needs. Further to this, there have been limited studies focusing on Nigerian students coming to Canada. Friesen (2022), looking at international students' experiences, noted that Canada struggles to process

international students' visas in time with their program start date, thus affecting universities' enrollments each year. Universities play their role in international student recruitment by granting admission to qualified students, but due to visa delays and refusals, many international students are forced to defer their admission to the next year, or are unable to come to Canada at all. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) and El Masri and Khan (2022) studied Indian international students' pre-arrival challenges which include navigating the visa process. Satzewich (2015) also described the visa application process in detail, including the required documents and the role of the visa officer in the process.

Although international student recruitment, international education and student migration are prominent areas of study in the immigration literature, my review of previous research in these areas shows that the majority of published works do not focus on international students' pre-arrival experiences and challenges, specifically student visa application procedures. Rather, most studies focus on arrival and settlement experiences such as international students' studying and coping experiences in schools and their region of study, and/or post-graduation such as work and residency experiences. Most related information on international students' visa experiences is on online blogs, educational websites, and news reports, with very sparse information in the academic literature. For instance, Ruiz and Baron (2013), who are both public policy experts, outlined in a Brookings Education blog post that the visa system is a major barrier in recruiting international students, but this report was not peer reviewed. Similarly, Iseolorunkanmi et al. (2021) also noted that there have been limited studies on international migration of postgraduate students.

The majority of studies that do address student pre-arrival experiences and visa processes, focus on international students from other parts of the world, with only a few focusing on Nigerian students (Eviwie, 2009). Some other studies generalize their study population to include students

from the international body irrespective of their nationalities, again with few focused on Nigerian students, especially Nigerian students in Canada (Milian et al., 2015). The present study contributes to the body of knowledge using a different study population and context, and the research findings will serve as a foundation for future research to build on.

2.7 Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks underpin this thesis, the following sections briefly outline the theories and how they are applicable to this study.

2.7.1 Structuration Theory

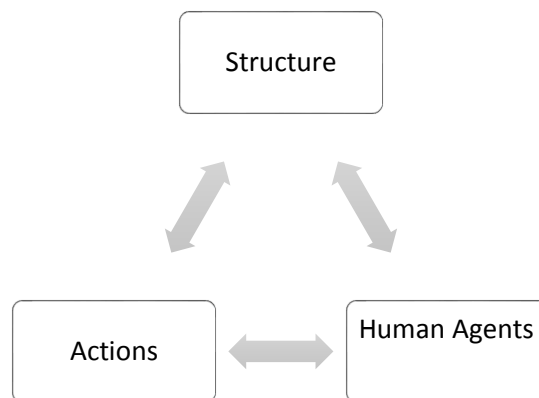
Structuration theory was introduced by British sociologist Anthony Giddens to study ways in which social systems are produced as a result of human interaction, and the relationship between individuals and social structures (Cohen, 1996).

Giddens structuration theory is prominent in migration studies, as it provides a clear description of the relationships between migration networks (Randell, 2016). Migration studies employ this framework to describe the relationship between structure and agency that influence an individual's decision-making process when moving to a new country (Randell, 2016). The main ideas of structuration theory have roots in both structuralism and functionalism (Giddens 1984). Structuralism and functionalism have similar tenets—"both emphasize the pre-eminence of the social whole over its individual parts" (Giddens, 1984:2), and explain that structure has primacy over action, and is formed by social practices over space and time (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens' approach examines two key concepts: Human Agency and Structure (Whittington, 2010). Giddens views the structure and agency as a mutually interacting duality, and

not as independent and conflicting elements (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Humans are regarded as independent, with the free will and power to make various choices; however, there are external factors that influence or constrain individuals' decisions and choices (Giddens, 1984). These external factors form the 'Structure'; this is described as the rules and resources that influence individuals' actions and decisions (Giddens, 1984).

Figure 2.3 Relationship between Structure, Actions and Agency



Structure is drawn by human agents, human agents produce actions, and actions are produced and reproduced to form structure (Jones and Karsten, 2008).

Giddens (1984) aims to show the relationship between subject and object by acknowledging the role of human agency in producing and reproducing human society.

2.7.2 Elements of Structuration

In understanding the concept of structuration, important elements that provide detailed descriptions of Giddens' structuration approach must be examined.

Human agency

Human agency consists of individuals' free will actions and varied behaviours. Giddens (1984) describes the human agent as a knowledgeable and capable subject, with free choice to

make intentional and calculated actions. Giddens (1984) notes that to be a human being is to be a purposive agent, who has reasons and motives for their activities, and is able to elaborate discursively upon those reasons.

Agency not only describes an individual's intentions of doing things but also their capability of doing those things in the first place (Giddens, 1984). Agency includes the actors and their actions in relation to the structure (Steiner et al., 2021).

Structure

Giddens describes structure to include the rules and resources that actors use in social interactions (Turner, 1986). An important part of structure is recognizing the differentiation between the concepts of "structure" and "systems". Humans achieve their desires and goals by adopting the rules and resources that constitute the "structure", this generates the various "systems", hence systems rely on structure to be sustained (Giddens, 1984). While structures are formed by organized practices, systems are shaped by the patterns of enacted conduct, which includes the repetition of social action and interaction (Giddens, 1984:131). Systems involve reproduced, organized and regular social practices amongst actors/agents (Giddens, 1984)

Structural factors include social institutions and networks such as the family, religious institutions, law and government institutions, which could both potentially enable and restrict an individual's choices depending on their rules and resources (Giddens, 1984).

Rules and resources

Rules are defined as "generalizable procedures" and "methodologies" that reflexive agents and employ as "formulas" for action in "social systems" (Turner, 1986: 971). According to Giddens (1984:21) "Rules are patterns that people follow and generalizable procedures applied in

the enactment/reproduction of social life". Rules are transformational and provide "interpretive schemes" by specifying rights and obligations that are the basis of sanctions (Turner 1986). Rules include a signification or legitimation drawn from the agent's diverse knowledge through the memory, to inform them about the external context and outcomes of an action. Rules could either serve in constituting meanings, or in defining sanctions and laws (Giddens, 1984).

Resources are the mediums that facilitate or construe social behaviours within the social system. Resources provides material and organizational facilities. Giddens examines two kinds of resources. Authoritative resources are used by agents for controlling persons, and determine individuals' access to the social, economic and political arenas that give them power over other agents (Goss & Lindquist, 1995). Allocative resources are used by agents to control material objects, which include the power of wealth and property (Goss & Lindquist, 1995). Other resources include skills, and social capital (Giddens, 1984). Giddens notes that individuals are not usually equally situated in the society, hence the distribution of resources and knowledge are different from one individual to another (Giddens, 1984).

Rules and resources are used by agents to modify their conduct. They can be recreated and changed into different forms and are used by the actors to bind social relations together. The duality of structure is a product of rules and resources that have been produced and reproduced to develop social actions (Giddens, 1984:19). These rules and resources are transformed into communications among agents in interactions, sanctions and power, and thus, in liaising social interactions (Giddens, 1984). The rules consist of laws, policies, regulations and guidelines.

2.7.3 Application of Structuration Theory to this Study

Structuration theory provides an understanding of human behaviours based on the interactions between the agent/actor and the social structure. It focuses on individuals, the “human agency” dimension and on the external factors that influence their choices, the “structural factors” (Giddens, 1979). It posits that although individuals are the center of all social activities, there are external factors that influence their choices and actions. These external factors are the structure that includes rules and resources. Structuration theory helps understand the significance of social structures on decisions and actions of human agents. The structure includes the rules and resources that are characterized as structural properties.

For this research, international students exercise agency while seeking to apply for a study visa, while the study visa process serves as the structure in place. International students with agency have desires, goals, wants and needs in light of which they view studying abroad (and/or obtaining Western credentials) as a means toward achieving a higher quality of life. Getting an education outside their country is one of their desires, but their desires could be influenced by external structural factors. They have the right to choose a place to get an international education, but could be limited by constraints imposed by the “structure”. These structural factors consist of the “rules” such as the immigration and student visa laws and policies and resources such as financial resources needed for the visa application process, and skills and knowledge to gain admission into a Canadian institution. Giddens explains the formulated rules are in place during social practices (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Such rules are guided by a formula with strict guidelines on principles to follow in any given situation, and individuals obey such rules without being able to describe or fully understanding the reasons behind the principle of the rule (Jones & Karsten, 2008). For this research, study visa application guidelines and requirements are an example of

formulated rules. Different countries of destination have diverse rules for different kind of students (undergraduate, graduate, married and student parents) coming from different countries of origin.

Giddens (1984) notes that motivations occur from plans and programmes that shape our conduct, not basically from our day-to-day activities. As there are conscious motivations, there are unconscious motivations, where individuals cannot necessarily state the reasons for their actions (Giddens, 1984). In our social life, there are levels of unconsciousness beyond the scope of an actor's awareness, where actors are unable to control or determine the outcomes (Giddens, 1984). An international student with a conscious motive to study in Canada, has limited control over the outcome of their visa, and can only do their best and hope to receive the visa. This explains that individual's plans and motives could be affected by some structural principles. For instance, an individual's motivation to study in Canada might be as a result of visa rejection from another country.

The structure enables and constrains the actions of international students at the same time. The ability to meet the student visa requirements, have the required finances to travel abroad and also skills to gain admission into your desired institution enables international students to study in Canada. The same structural properties that enable an international student to achieve their desire, when unavailable, limit the achievement of their desire. The impact of such structures becomes especially problematic if there is bias in how those structures constrain and/or enable the actions of agents. The iniquitous effects of such bias, in the form of racial discrimination, is a key focus of Critical Race Theory.

2.7.4 Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory originates from the civil and political rights movement in the 1970s

and the criticism of the Critical Legal Studies movement in the 1980s, while analyzing racial injustice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso & Solórzano, 2005). It is also traced to the early writings of the Harvard law school professor Derrick Albert Bell Junior where he reassessed civil rights cases, and the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw where she explored the intersection of critical theory, critical legal studies, and race (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998). In sociology, critical race theory is used to describe the racial bias enabled by the power distribution across various social structures and practices which advances the interest of white people at the expense of people of colour (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005). Critical race theory goes beyond racism, but also provides understanding on how racism intersects with other forms of subordination such as the effect of sexism and classism on people of colour (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005: 121).

2.7.5 Elements of Critical Race Theory

Four notable concepts drawn from critical race theory as related to this thesis are discussed below.

1. Differential racialization

The concept of differential racialization explains that different racial groups are treated differently in different settings, and racial minorities such as Asians, Hispanics and Blacks are segregated, oppressed, and exploited differently, as related to the prejudices and stereotypes differentially affecting them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

2. Intersectionality

The term ‘intersectionality’ was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe how race intersects with gender. It further explains the discrimination faced by individuals with intersecting social identities in different contexts and overtime (Crenshaw, 1989). The different layers of identities include race, national origin, class, immigration status, sexual identity and

gender identity (Crenshaw, 1991).

The complexity of intersectionality prevents individuals even in a homogenous group from experiencing similar patterns of discrimination, and individuals who fit in more categories experience more disadvantages (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This shows the importance of considering multiple intersecting social identities when studying the lived experience of members of a particular group. This also helps understand how individuals' social identities are multi-dimensional and reflect systems of privileges and/or possible inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991).

3. Structural Determinism

Critical race theory also holds that 'racism' is a broad term with different forms such as intentional racism, unintentional racism, unconscious racism, institutional racism, and white privilege-reserving favor' (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001: 25). Structural determinism examines these different forms of racism and holds that "the system, by its reason of structure and vocabulary, cannot redress certain types of wrong" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001:26), which highlights the need for reforming certain laws and restructuring the system to fix some forms of racism.

4. Social Capital

Critical race theory scholars note that one of the major ways to challenge the structure is by accumulating social capital (Yosso and Solórzano, 2005). Social capital can be understood as 'networks of people and community resources that help one navigate through society's institutions and structures of inequalities' (Yosso and Solórzano, 2005:131). Racialized minorities accumulate social capital to maneuver through the system by sharing information and resources within their social networks (Yosso, 2005).

2.7.6 Application of Critical Race Theory to this study

Racism is an integral aspect of international students' experiences, and it is not excluded from students' visa application experiences. Critical race theory highlights the possible racial bias embedded in social structures that disadvantage racialized groups. Critical race theory is saying that discrimination primarily based on race, could disadvantage people. However, it also recognizes other factors such as various intersectional forms of disadvantage (including marital/familial status and social class), and the presence or absence of social networks and social capital which can impact students' overall experience. As suggested by IRCC's internal study, previously internalized stereotypes about Nigerians could possibly influence a visa officer's decision on a Nigerian student's application.

The concept of differential racialization as discussed by Delgado & Stefancic, (2001), where racialized groups are viewed and treated differently within the same setting explains how African students are treated differently compared to other racialized groups. For instance, both Asian and African students are subjects of racism, but African students are treated differently from Asian students by the Canadian visa system in terms of eligibility criteria and refusal rates. Another connection to differential racialization is the presence of limited visa application centres in Africa compared with other countries.

The concept of intersectionality holds that individuals have various overlapping and intersecting identities that distinguish their individual experiences of oppression, inequality and discrimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For example, in addition to being a racialized international student, Nigerian visa applicants may also be spouses and parents, and thus may experience a different kind of discrimination from single students when applying for a visa.

Building upon the Structuration Theory conceptualization of the constraining features of

structures on individual agency, the critical race theory concept of structural determinism holds that racialized minorities such as African students could encounter multiple forms of racism during the visa application process, such as internalized stereotypes, resource constraints, and restricted visa rules. If the structural constraints of the visa system are amplified by such racial biases (such as differential eligibility requirements) then racialized applicants are likely to be disadvantaged when it comes to visa application outcomes.

Finally, critical race theory describes social networks as a form of cultural wealth that enables racialized groups to survive in a segregated world with racism and discrimination (Yosso, 2005). Social networks and social capital such as peer groups and additional information could help students navigate the visa system, and “work around” possible formal sources of discrimination.

In conclusion, this chapter provides explanations on Nigerian student migration to Canada, also focusing on the University of Manitoba as an attractive study choice. It presents statistics highlighting the increasing numbers of international students in Canada, and the challenges associated with the student visa application process for Nigerian students including concerns about racial stereotypes. This chapter also emphasized the gaps and the contribution of this research to the body of knowledge. The application of structuration theory unveils the impact of the institutional structures on student’s agency, while critical race theory is used to expose the possible covert yet systemic racial bias in the visa application process along with other intersecting factors. While this chapter establishes a strong foundation for understanding the existing literatures and theoretical framework, the next chapter enlightens on the practical steps that was taken to uncover the present realities, detailing the procedures used to capture the experiences of Nigerian international graduate students.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This study explores the research question: How do Nigerian international graduate students at the University of Manitoba perceive the Canadian student visa application process based on their experiences? This research question helps gather information on perceptions and experiences of nine graduate international students from Nigeria at the University of Manitoba. The study is qualitative in design and utilizes semi-structured interviews to gather data.

3.1 Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research researchers' goal is to understand participants' worldviews and uses a theoretical lens to situate and understand the meanings individuals or groups bring to a social or human problem, which includes a complex description and interpretation of the problem and signals for a call for action (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of a qualitative study is not to generalize but to create awareness about an issue (Tavares, 2021), which is also a major aim of this research, which gives room to generate and gather rich, relevant and knowledgeable information. This study focuses on a smaller sample size to gather specific and detailed descriptions of people's actual lived experiences, using an exploratory interview method.

3.2 Study Area and Participants

The study area for this research is University of Manitoba, Winnipeg Manitoba Canada, and the study participants are Nigerian international graduate students. The inclusion criteria for the study were: (1) participants must be Nigerian international graduate students (Masters or Doctoral student) studying at the University of Manitoba, and (2) participants must have applied for their study visa from Nigeria with a Nigerian Passport.

3.3 Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used in this research to select participants for the interviews. Purposive sampling involves the researcher deliberately selecting participants based on the qualities the participant possesses, in relation to the goal of the research (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). It is a form of non-probability sampling that allows the researcher to determine what needs to be known, and then identifies and selects individuals or groups of individuals who are well-informed about the subject of study (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

I recruited participants from the University of Manitoba Nigerian Students' Association (UMNISA). After receiving approval from the Association, I sent the recruitment document to the President and it was posted on its social media platform. Participants began to show interest by texting and sending mails to show their interest or express how they did not meet the eligibility requirement. I confirmed that the interested and eligible participants met the recruitment criteria, then sent a consent form and scheduled an interview based on their availability and convenience. Nine respondents were recruited successively and only eligible participants who were willing and available to participate at the given time were included.

3.3.1 Brief description of each participant interviewed

All participants' names have been replaced with a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

The first participant interviewed, Favour, is married and arrived to Canada in August 2022 to pursue a Master's degree after completing her bachelor's degree program and working for some years in Nigeria. Favour applied for her visa only once without including her spouse in her application. She applied by herself using shared information from previous applicants and online resources. Due to the delays in getting the required documents and the visa processing time, she had deferred her admission once, and had a total wait time of three months from the initial

application submission to the final response. She mentioned at the time of the interview, that she had mad applications for her spouse to come join her in Canada.

The second participant interviewed is Oyinlola, a single student who came to Canada in December 2021 to pursue a Master's degree after obtaining a bachelor's degree in Nigeria. Oyinlola initially applied for a visa, but was rejected. She then sought assistance from an immigration agent for her second application. Due to the visa processing delays, Oyinlola had to defer her admission three times, and had to wait 12 months in total across both visa applications, with waiting times of 5 and 7 months for each application respectively.

The third interviewee is Mike, a married PhD student, who had previously completed a master's program in Nigeria, arrived Canada in May 2022. Mike applied for a student visa once, without including his spouse and children, and he independently handled the application process. He had also deferred his admission once due to the prolonged processing time, resulting in a cumulative waiting period of 7 months. At the time of the interview, his family was currently in Nigeria and he plans to apply for them to come join him in the future.

Aisha, the fourth interviewee, is a single student who arrived Canada in December 2020 to pursue a master's degree, after completing a bachelor's degree in Nigeria. Aisha had applied for her visa but asked for advice using various social media groups, and had also deferred her admission once. Her application process lasted for a total of 8 months, which was the longest duration for a single applicant among all participants.

Halima is the fifth participant interviewed. She is single and had arrived in Canada in August 2022 to pursue a master's degree after the completion of her bachelor's in Nigeria. Halima applied for a study permit once with the aid of an immigration agent. She had also deferred her admission once due to visa processing delays, and had an overall waiting period of 4 months.

Adenike, the sixth participant interviewed, experienced the most favourable circumstance, being the only participant who did not defer her admission and received approval for her application within 2 months from her submission date. Adenike, despite being married, chose to apply for her visa without including her spouse in order to demonstrate her strong ties to her home country, and applied for her visa as a single person. She had previously completed a master's degree in Nigeria, and arrived Canada in January 2022 to pursue another master's program.

Anna is the seventh participant interviewed and she arrived Canada in September 2022 to pursue a master's program after completing a bachelor's in Nigeria. Anna is unmarried and applied for a student visa once, having completed the application by herself. She had also deferred her admission once and had a total wait period of 3 months from her submission date.

The eighth participant interviewed is Peter, a married Ph.D. student who arrived in Canada in August 2021. He had previously completed a Master's degree in Nigeria. Peter's first visa application which he submitted himself was rejected after three months due to financial reasons and home ties, and he had to reapply without his spouse and child, and with assistance from an immigration agent. His second application took six months and he also deferred his admission twice due to the visa delays.

The final participant interviewed is Rita, a single Master's student who had previously completed a bachelor's degree in Nigeria, and had arrived Canada in December 2021. Rita applied for a study permit once with the aid of an immigration agent, and had a total waiting time of 6 months. She had also deferred her admission twice due to visa processing delays.

3.4 Data Sources and Data Collection Strategies

3.4.1 Data sources

Semi-structured interview is used to collect data for this research. Semi-structured interviewing is frequently the most efficient and convenient method of gathering information, as it is based on human conversation which allows the interviewer to modify the style, pace, and organization of questions in order to stimulate comprehensive responses from the interviewee (Qu & Dumay, 2011). It allows interviewees to respond in their own words and in the manner in which they think, which is useful if the researcher wants to understand the perception of interviewees on a particular subject (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The semi-structured interview method is suitable for this research because it allows me ask specific questions informed by existing knowledge of relevant policies, theory and research on the study permit application process and experience, while still allowing the interview to develop in unexpected directions, and potentially opening up significant areas of new information (Tavares, 2021).

3.4.2 Data collection strategy

Students could select in-person or online interviews. All nine participants choose to be interviewed online via Zoom based on their convenience and availability. At the time the interviews were conducted, although classes had resumed in person, we were all required to wear masks and that really hurts the in-person interview experience from a psychological standpoint. The interviews were conducted between October 2022 and January 2023, and they lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. I ensured the participants chose their interview time when they were in a comfortable space, which enabled students to share their experiences freely. Participants are informed that they could skip any question they were not comfortable responding to, and I ensured I used appropriate prompts to follow up on their answers. I also left silences during the interview

to allow them add additional thoughts and opinions, which also created room for adjustments of the questions. Participants seemed to feel comfortable and freely shared their experiences and gave relevant recommendations based on their personal concerns. I also made use of a reflective journal to record my personal experience during the interviews. In the journal, I documented participants tone such as emotions like excitement or moodiness. I noted new things I learnt, and things that caught me by surprise, and also significant instances in participants' experience. During the analysis of the data, I referred to these notes to understand each participant's viewpoint and refresh my memory of their individual experience.

An interview guide (See Appendix II) was used to coordinate the flow of the interview. The content of the interview guide was divided into two sections; the first section contained demographic questions such as participant's marital status, month and year of arrival in Canada, type of degree pursuing at the University of Manitoba, and previous degrees obtained. The second section were specific questions as regards to participants study permit application process. Participants were asked to share their experience during their application process, the documents required, how laborious the process was, if they used an immigration consultant or not, if they applied more than once and the differences between both applications, the role of the university and COVID-19 on the outcome of their visa. Participants were also asked about the previous knowledge and information they had before applying for their visa and how they came about the information—whether they were aware of the visa process of other countries and how it was different from Canada's process, and most importantly, their overall impression of the Canadian visa application process.

3.5 Ethical Considerations, Reflexivity and Rigour

3.5.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations include the consequences that research might have on the study population (Tracy, 2010). I received ethical clearance approval from the Research Ethics Board 1 of University of Manitoba, before the data collection for the research (See Appendix III). Participants were informed as to the nature and purpose of the study, and were required to complete an informed consent form prior to the commencement of the interviews. Similarly, they were informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point. In addition, pseudonyms were used to replace participant's names to protect privacy, as I did not divulge their identity or data in any way that could be linked to them. I ensured participants were willing and ready to take part in the research, and I conducted the interviews in an environment where participants were most comfortable. Once the interview data was transcribed into digital text format for analysis, all audio-visual recordings of the interviews were deleted. De-identified interview data and information generated from the research were kept confidential in password protected files on my password-protected computer, accessible only to myself and/or my supervisor Dr. Jason Edgerton.

3.5.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves me stating my position in the study, being self-aware and conducting self-analysis during the research process (Pillow, 2003). Pillow (2003: 178) notes that reflexivity requires researchers to be “critically conscious, through personal accounting of how the researchers’ self-location, position, and interests influence all stages of the research process”. Markula and Silk (2011) note that in a constructivist/interpretive analysis, the researcher and

participant could influence one another in the generation of knowledge, leading to a co-constructed reality. In this sense, I was aware of the potential to unintentionally influence the research findings.

I am a Nigerian graduate international student studying in the University of Manitoba, who has previously applied for a student visa to Canada, from within Nigeria, using a Nigerian Passport. I acknowledge that I identify with many of the characteristics of the participants, and I stated my position in the research to all participants, as a graduate visa student and also the researcher. I ensured I did not impose my viewpoints, opinions, or beliefs on participants during data collection, analysis and interpretation. Although I did not seek to consciously alter or unduly influence participants' responses, the fact that I shared the student visa application experience helped me easily build rapport with the participants, understand the manners and expressions they used, and ensure they were very comfortable sharing their experience with me, because they felt I could relate with them.

This also gave me certain insights and understandings that allowed me ask pertinent follow-up questions and/or prompts. Also, the anonymized transcripts were shared with my supervisor in each step of the analysis process, ensuring the data was not analyzed from a biased perspective

3.5.3 Rigour

Tracy (2010: 841) explains rigour in qualitative inquiry to include high quality descriptions and explanations and “richness” which is achieved through the theoretical constructs, contexts, data sources and samples, data collection and analysis procedures. Rigour was achieved in this study as I ensured I collected relevant, adequate and rich data that examined the research questions. Before the data analysis, participants were sent the transcripts and given the chance to validate the information provided, to ensure that there was no misinterpretation or misinformation, and I was able to accurately capture what they wanted to convey about their experiences.

3.6 Data Analysis

The interview recordings were manually transcribed and typed by me. After typing, I listened to the recordings again to correct any error and check for accuracy before deleting them. The data generated was organized and analyzed using the qualitative approach of coding and categorizing, which includes organizing and interpreting the data generated. The coding process was done manually on paper and later organized with Microsoft word processing. Saldana (2016) describes coding as a method that allows the organization of similar data into categories because of their shared characteristics. This creates a path to develop an increasingly detailed knowledge about the phenomenon being studied by highlighting the key constructs in the data (Creswell, 2007). Codes were generated to identify repetitive patterns and irregularities, and the frequency, sequence and causation of these patterns or irregularities within the interview data (Saldana, 2016). Saldana (2016) notes that coding itself is not analysis but the ability to understand the depth and evaluate the content of the research data, and analysis occurs with the repetitive layers of multiple codes.

Interpretation involves filtering or sifting through the data to understand their significance (Ely et al., 1997). For data interpretation, thematic analysis which helps “explore the understanding of an issue” (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 387), was adopted. Thematic analysis entails structuring and organizing the codes into themes or clusters to create an interconnectivity in the interpretation of the texts, and also identifying recurrent patterns to create thematic networks, describing and exploring, summarising and interpreting patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The themes that emerged from the data included patterned responses that were related to the research question, previous research and the theoretical framework.

I began to search for themes in the codes, and derived themes based on their significance to the research question, existing literature and the theoretical framework. I considered how the data is related to a broader discourse or worldview, also interpreting the data in relation to the theoretical and paradigmatic approach used in this study (Ely et al., 1997). While creating themes to create an easier understanding of the research questions, I ensure I did not distort the words and meanings given by participants, maintaining the voices of the participants, and did not allow my interpretations to distort the original data during the analysis. Participants also had the opportunity to review and edit the transcript before it was included in the data analysis. One main theme was generated with five sub-themes in relation to the research question and the theory used in the research.

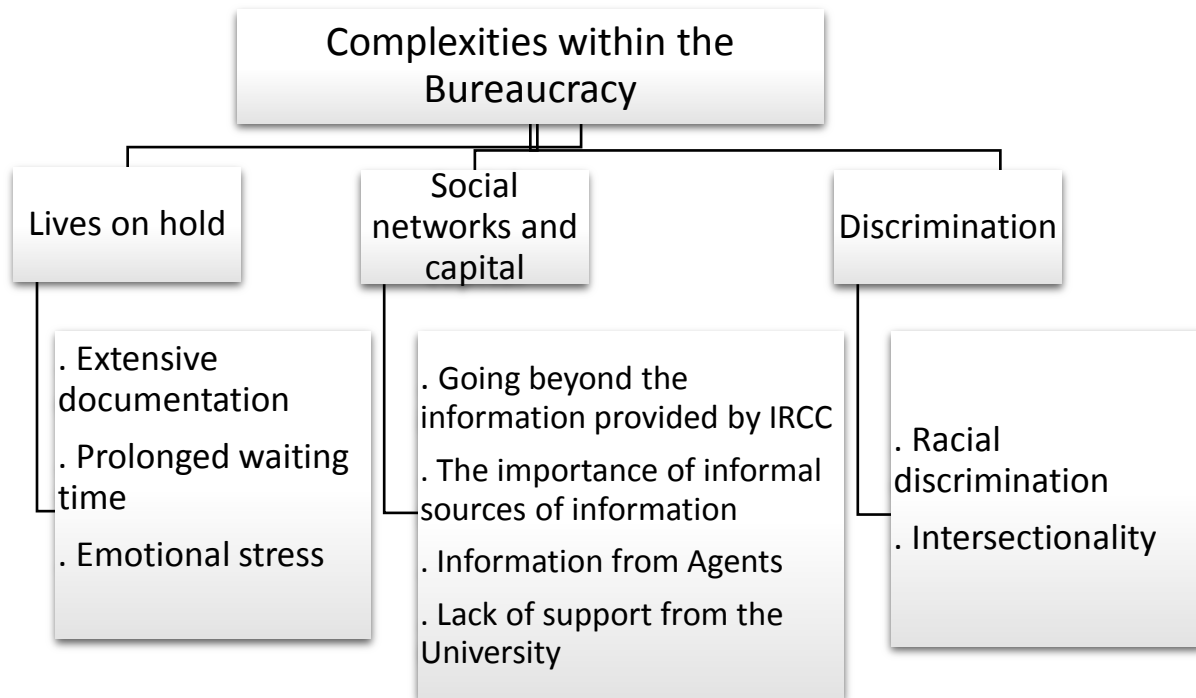
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the interpretation of the interview data. One global theme emerged from the data: The bureaucratic complexities associated with the student visa application process. Three sub-themes—Lives on Hold, Social Networks and Capital, and Discrimination—highlight the key elements in students' application experiences, the specific constraints students faced during their application, and their overall perception and impression of the Canadian student visa application process.

Figure 4.1 Themes for Analysis



4.2 Lives on Hold

The majority of the students interviewed reported that the Canadian student visa application process forced them to put numerous life decisions on hold due to: (i) the difficulty in satisfying the extensive documentation requirements, (ii) the prolonged processing time, where students endured very long waits (often much longer than IRCC had indicated and typically longer than in other countries), (iii) which caused emotional stress and anxiety in applicants as they awaited their fate.

4.2.1 Extensive Documentation

Participants shared that the acquisition and provision of required documents was the most important thing during their study permit application process, as these were major determinants of visa approval or refusal. All participants interviewed mentioned the various documents they used in their visa application and how laborious it was to acquire requested documents related to proof of funds, statement of purpose and proof of home ties. When asked about the specific documents used for their visa application, participants listed documents such as bank statements, landed property documents, statement of purpose, reference letters, and letters of sponsorships among other personal documents like their passport.

Anna, a master's student, detailed the documents she used in her visa application.

I knew I had to show a bank statement, I needed proof of funds, I needed to write my statement of purpose, I needed to write another letter explaining my sponsorship in terms of finances. In the letters, I explained my background, I told them about my family, told them about my ties back home, and why I want to return to Nigeria afterwards. Definitely, you'll do your medical...I remember putting pictures of my family also (*Anna, Single, Applied Once, Wait time-3 months*).

Participants noted that getting the required documentation was not easy. One participant, Favour, stated that this stage was the most difficult stage for her, because it required obtaining numerous documents. She said;

The most difficult stage for me was getting my results and transcripts, because the application requires a lot of documents. From the admission stage I had to get my transcripts which was not easy processing, then after that, that was a different ball game. I needed bank statements, proof of home ties. Like you have to prove everything to show your home ties and that you'll return to Nigeria after your studies. The documents I used, you have to get reference letters, work reference, and you have to apply to the HR to get the work reference which might take up to two weeks if you are lucky. Those were the difficult ones. The rest were personal documents you have available (*Favour, Married, Applied Once, Wait time- 3 months*).

Favour further shared how she had to travel to get the required documents, and how she needed permission from work before travelling, which was not an easy process.

I applied in Lagos, and the only obstacle was still with documents, having to travel home to Ilorin to get my landed properties documents, you know I have to show it to proof home ties. So that was the major thing, having to do that. And then, when I was told to do my medicals, and I had to take excuse from work, and you will not want to tell them about your visa, so all those back and forth (*Favour, Married, Applied Once, Wait time- 3 months*).

All participants emphasized the importance of getting the required documents, as the documents are used to convince the visa officer to accept or refuse your visa, since there is no interview for the visa officer to ask questions about your application, so the documents were the only yardstick to determine the outcome of your student visa/study permit application. For instance, Aisha noted the importance of providing all necessary documentation, as it gives your application an edge.

Provide all documents, don't feel it's too much, landed properties, transcripts, bank statements, and all. Some even add pictures of themselves and their sponsor to show a proof of relation, so just do everything to explain your application well, and convince the visa officers. . . . I know some people do all these things and still get denied, but at least you have an upper hand that you followed the right process. Gather all the documents you need,

organize them well and just be hopeful you'll get it (*Aisha, Single, Applied Once, Wait time- 8 months*).

Oyinlola also mentioned that no document was too much for an application, and the importance of proving yourself beyond reasonable doubt when applying for a Canadian student visa.

I feel when applying for your student visa no document is too much, it can only be too little, so when you are doing that, just proof beyond reasonable doubt...if you have to write any letter that you feel is necessary...if you're sponsoring yourself that's fine, if someone is sponsoring you make sure they write all the necessary letters, prove to them beyond reasonable doubt that yeah you're financially capable... there is nothing like too much documents when applying for a study permit, just exhaust it, and let it be an exhaustive list...yeah (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, Wait time- 5 and 7 months*).

Several participants mentioned that incomplete documentation leads to visa delays and refusals causing admission deferrals. Mike noted that submitting an incomplete document could lead to a delayed application process.

You should take time to gather the requested documents and not submit incomplete documents, because if it's incomplete they'll return. So this will avoid delaying your application process". (*Mike, Married, Applied Once, Wait time- 7 months*).

Peter also reiterated Mike's claim. He shared the importance of preparing ahead and getting the documents you need early.

Also, your documents, get everything ready, they are a lot. Your financial statements, proof of home ties and all, because those are the common reasons people get rejected, so just know what to put and arrange everything accordingly. If you know the documents you need earlier, you can just start preparing them ahead, so you don't have to rush and all (*Peter, Married, Applied Twice, Wait time-3 and 6 months*).

Oyinlola further revealed how her incomplete documentation led to the rejection of her initial visa application, as she didn't include the extra letters and documents people included.

So the first time I applied, I actually did it on my own, and I actually submitted the documents listed on IRCC website. Okay they said proof of finances, I got my Dad's financial statement, passport, just the basic documents. I didn't put all the extra letters and

documents that people usually put, and that was Covid 19 period I did my application...I waited for about 3 or 4 months, or about 5 months, and when I did the whole biometrics thing, they rejected me two weeks after (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, Wait time- 5 and 7 months*).

Furthermore, participants revealed the negative effect pandemic restrictions had on the acquisition of the documents they required for their visa application, which also caused extra fees.

Aisha noted:

It was COVID period so getting some documents were delayed and spending extra fees just to get them, like transcripts and even renewing my passport” (*Aisha, Single, Applied Once, Wait time-8 months*)

Adenike also expressed how she had to apply for her visa with a conditional admission letter, because she could not send her transcript as schools were closed due to COVID. She shared:

Another thing that covid did was that some of the schools were closed in Nigeria, and sending my transcripts abroad was delayed, so I had to proceed with just sharing my admission letter with the pending transcript even though I had gotten the admission, but then they stated that I had a transcript, so I had to use them for my visa process (*Adenike, Married, Applied Once, Wait time- 2 months*).

There were several documents mentioned by participants as the most important documents needed for their student visa application. These include: proof of funds—which translates to finances to show you can adequately pay your tuition and living expenses without working in Canada, a well-written statement of purpose properly explaining your application case file, giving genuine reasons for your study plan, and expressing that you’ll return to your home country after your studies.

Proof of Funds

Participants noted proof of funds to be one of the most important documents, when they were applying for their study permit. Adenike explained the importance of finances, and how she got a loan to cover her study expenses. She stated:

Before I started my application then, the general story was that ermm, you must show this amount over six months or nine months. There were so many stories, but for me I was lucky to get a loan approval, and the loan covered my studies for two years, covered my living expenses, I also had savings, I had my pension, so I want to believe....well from my understanding, I always tell people that if you are going to school anywhere, forget about whatever country it is you are from, your expectation is that you can cover your fees, you can cover your living expenses, and you have enough to support yourself, and you can justify why you are going (*Adenike, Married, Applied Once, Wait time- 2 months*).

Similar to Adenike's experience, Rita also agreed that finances were the number one thing the visa officer considers when deciding on the outcome of an application.

You need to demonstrate to the visa officer that you have enough money, like enough financial capability to sponsor yourself. Like your parent need to have enough money to sponsor you to Canada, because Canada is not a place you can come without money...the bills that are here is a lot. Yeah, so this is the most important, the number one, because that's what the visa officer would be after, financial capability. Are you capable to sponsor yourself? Are your parents capable to sponsor you to Canada? That's what will determine your visa (*Rita, Single, Applied Once, Wait time-6 months*).

Similarly, another participant, Oyinlola, confirmed the importance of finances on the outcome of ones visa application. She reported that her initial application got rejected because the visa officer was not convinced by the financial documents she provided, and she had to include extra documents in her second application just to prove her financial capacity:

The reason I was rejected the first time was that 'oh we don't believe you could pay your school fees in Canada without working', so it was based on financial grounds and we were trying to tackle all forms relating to finances. This second time around I included all the extra documents, I went as far as using landed properties, we used a letter of sponsorship from my Dad, even we added some documents showing that this business belongs to my Dad, just to prove my finances (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, Wait time-5 and 7 months*).

In summary, all participants indicated that documentation in terms of showing proof of funds is an important requirement for a Canadian study visa, as its given significant weight in determining the outcome of ones visa application. They also indicated that procuring satisfactory proof of funds documentation is not easy.

Statement of Purpose (SOP)

Other participants believed that, aside from finances, a well-written statement of purpose was also an important document in the study permit application. For some participants, such as Halima, statement of purpose was as important as finances. She shared:

When anyone asks me, how did you get your visa? What document did you use? I just tell them, the most important thing is your statement of purpose and your statement of account. Like those are the vital documents. To me, statement of purpose is everything when coming to study in Canada (*Halima, Single, Applied once, Wait time-4 months*).

She further stated that the statement of purpose was like an interview, so it is best to write a detailed statement of purpose to make it clear for the visa officer:

The statement of purpose is more like an interview, since as a student we did not have to visit the embassy for interview, so we need to write to convince the visa officer, like okay, this is what I came to do here. The visa officer cannot take his/her phone to call you that in page 2, paragraph 3, I don't understand the part where you wrote this, this and this, creating doubts for the visa officer, making the visa officer have doubts is just reducing your chances of coming to Canada...because I feel like if you can clear yourself and make the visa officer understand like this is important to me, and this is what I plan to do, it will be clear for the visa officer to be like okay, let me give this person a chance (*Halima, Single, Applied once, Wait time-4 months*).

In addition to finances and statement of purpose, all nine participants emphasized the importance of proving your home ties and explaining it in a convincing manner in your statement of purpose. Participants were further asked how they were able to prove home ties in their statement of purpose. Oyinlola shared:

Sometimes they reject people based on family ties, so you prove beyond reasonable doubt that you have enough reason to go back home...yeah I have like this here, I have this business, I have this home, just something that shows that you do not want to run away, you have something that is taking you back home or what not (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, Wait time- 5 and 7 months*).

Rita also shared the documents she used to prove home ties, such as her Dad's property documents and the ID's of her family members.

I submitted my Dad's property documents, you can use that to show that you are not running away and you have something to go back to, like you need to prove that once you are done with your studies, you'll go back to your country. So I attached my Dad's property documents, I submitted my family ID cards, just to show that I still have family back home (*Rita, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Overall, my findings show that most participants considered the process of obtaining the required documents for their visa to be quite strenuous, and the most difficult stage in the visa application process as it was the yardstick for a visa refusal or approval. Obtaining the required documents was not easy, many students were confused as to what to include in their application, and most indicated that finances, a well-written statement of purpose and proof of home ties were the most important documents in their student visa application. All participants had agreed that getting the right documents was very important for your visa application, and preparing your documents early is required, because the documents are numerous and varied, and the process could be overwhelming and time-consuming.

4.2.2 Prolonged Waiting/ Processing Time

Participants shared how the process was after they had put in their application and were waiting for a response from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Participants emphasized the waiting time and how they had to wait for a long period from when they applied for their visa till when they got the final approval.

All participants except one had to wait for at least three months before receiving an approval. Rita shared that she waited for six months before getting her visa, and how the waiting period was a terrible time for her.

After applying for the visa, that's another story on its own part, cause you have to wait for almost ...like me for example, I waited for like 6 months before I got my visa, and those six months was the most terrible time of my life, the worst time of my life, because I was literally down, I was thinking about my whole life, I've never felt something like that in my life. To be honest I wasn't expecting to wait for 6 months, like I wasn't even expecting that. I was more than shocked, I was amazed. Like that wasn't on my mind that I was going

to wait for 6 months. I knew the processing takes at least 3 months, but 6 months? That was damn too long (*Rita, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Oyinlola also shared that she had to defer her admission three times because of the delay in getting her visa, and waited for five months before getting her first visa refusal, and seven months in total before getting her visa approval.

I had to defer this admission thrice because of the challenges I had in getting my visa...it was a lot. So the first time I applied, I waited for about 3 or 4 months, or about 5 months, and when I did the whole biometrics thing, they rejected me two weeks after, I was so devastated...The second time, I had waited 5 months, then they asked for another bank statement, and I was like, 'why are these people trying to stress and frustrate my life?' like...and this second time I submitted my application along with medicals because I was trying to cut time, because I didn't want to defer my admission again, because at this time I had already deferred it twice... After I sent them that, I thought it was going to be so fast, but then I waited for an extra two months! And I was like what's going on? At this point I already deferred my admission to January 2022 again (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time- 5 and 7 months*).

Adenike, who was the only participant that experienced a short processing time, also noted that although her process was smooth, she knew that it was not usually that way, as she knew people who had waited for 5-6 months.

I was supposed to resume January 2022, and I applied September 2021...so the usual fear is that time is too short you won't get approved in time. By the time I applied, I haven't done my medical. Early October I got the update to go for my medicals, and by November 16, I got my passport request. It was quite short because I know people that started before me, and even a colleague that was trying to put me through, he applied like 5-6 months before me and he didn't get approval until I had already gotten back my passport with my visa. So it was quite smooth for me, which people had already said it's not always smooth (*Adenike, Married, Applied once, wait time-2 months*).

I further asked Adenike the reasons she felt her application had a short processing time. She explained that she had a detailed statement of purpose, and was sure that only an administrative error would get her application rejected.

I wrote my Statement of Purpose in such a way that whoever picks it up, would see the basic things that are needed to be explained, like why did I apply, why choose this course, family times back home and all of that. My finance(s), I was very detailed with that...this

is how much I needed, this is the amount I have, and this is the back up. And at the end of my letter, I kind of put an appendix to show the relevant attachments I'm putting in my client documents, just to look at it. I believe at that point in time if there'll be any rejection—In fact I wasn't thinking about any rejection because I felt if I've been able to justify why I want to travel, it was a career advancement for me, I have the finance, I have the relevant documents, I've been able to explain it, so I just assumed, except there is something else, or maybe an administrative error or something, I should get an approval (*Adenike, Married, Applied once, wait time-2 months*).

Uncertainty

Participants shared how the processing time was uncertain and unpredictable. Mike expressed how he could not predict how long the application would take, and was just hopeful:

“When I started I didn't know when it was going to end, you can't even predict how long the application will take, and you just have to go along with the flow. You are not 100 percent sure and at the same time you just want to continue with it and hope to see the end” (*Mike, Married, Applied once, wait time-7 months*).

Anna also shared that it was a stressful process waiting, having to check her portal multiple times, with uncertainty always lurking.

I applied in May and I got my decision at the end of August... It was very stressful, I applied in May but I've started the process like long before, you know trying to get all the documents together, but I submitted the application in May 12. It was very stressful waiting, checking my accounts 100 times a day to see if they have done anything, you know the normal thing. Like it's really stressful, because you don't even know, and then you'll be hearing all these stories of random rejections and you don't know if you'll get it or not. So that's really stressful, with the uncertainty behind it (*Anna, Single, Applied once, wait time-3 months*).

Participants were asked about the estimated processing time that was shown on the website at the time of their application, because IRCC's processing time changes periodically. Mike shared that the website showed him his application would be processed based on the applications currently processed by IRCC, making it a wait of unpredictable duration.

The website showed me that it is based on the application at hand... Yes, they are right, but that also mean they don't have an estimated waiting time you now had to wait until you get a response, and this waiting you cannot say how long, because I do not have access to the number of applications they are dealing with, so I cannot say how many applications

are being processed, so I cannot estimate when next they are going to contact me. In that situation you can be under tension because you don't know when your application will be approved. So you don't have to put 100 percent assurance in the application and just keep hoping. I'll say it's just a journey of uncertainty, like you are not sure, you just give it a trial and then you are hoping to see to the end of it (*Mike, Married, Applied once, wait time-7 months*).

Rita also mentioned that the Nigerian Student Express and Direct Stream that was introduced by IRCC was not encouraged after 3 months. The Nigerian Student Express was introduced to reduce the processing time of Nigerian students to 20 days, if they provided certain documents. She shared that the students she knew who had provided the required documents still had to wait for 4-5 months.

There was even one thing IRCC did, they told us that once you write IELTS, like the process was going to take like 2-3 weeks. IRCC started this thing for like one month and they stopped this thing entirely. The minister of something came to Nigeria, and they agreed on the whole process that Nigerian students should be writing IELTS, and after they write the IELTS, their processing time is not going to be long, like 2 or 3 weeks. But like after 3 months of this they just changed the whole thing. I know a lot of people that wrote this IELTS and they waited more than 5 months or 4 months...Mehn (*Rita, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Halima, also stated that the uncertainty associated with the process and prolonged waiting time discourages students from Nigeria from applying to Canada. As students might not want to wait so long when they were uncertain of getting the visa.

A lot of people really want to study in Canada, but they do not really know about the process and hearing that I have to wait for a long period of time, just discourages them. Like okay what if I wait for this period of time and I do not get any response. Okay, I know of someone that actually waited for like seven months, or so and still got denied. So I feel like the waiting period is too long. Okay, I can still count myself as lucky because I got my visa within four months, people wait for like 5-6 months. I do not even know if it only my country or like other country, but the waiting time is too much (*Halima, Single, Applied Once, Wait time- 4 months*).

Life Delays

Participants, whom had already spent a significant amount of time procuring various documents to support their application, further shared how after submission of their application the delayed processing time caused life delays for them, affected their personal plans, and rendered some jobless because they were hoping to travel soon. Anna shared how she wanted to get a job, but she couldn't because she didn't know when her visa would be approved.

I remember I wanted to get another job, and then I had to kind of delay because they didn't want someone who was going to come to work and then leave Nigeria shortly afterwards (*Anna, Single, Applied once, wait time-3 months*).

Oyinlola also shared how her life was paused because she was waiting for her visa. She was sitting at home doing nothing, and had to get a job because of the endless waiting time.

I remember that time when I was waiting for this whole thing, I was literally doing nothing because I had finished serving (a one-year program mandatory for all Nigerian graduates) and I just wanted to do my masters. I did not get a job or nothing, so I was literally just sitting at home doing nothing. My life was paused, it was not moving forward, because I was waiting for my visa...not until I started working in Lagos, that is when some form of sanity came back to my life, because then, I had something to keep me afloat, I had something doing, and that was when the whole pressure melted away slowly. I am a graduate, I mean I want to study and then the visa is not forthcoming or whatever, and it's not like I exactly even know when the visa is going to come, it just felt like an endless wait which doesn't make sense (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*).

Similarly, another participant Mike, shared how he had wanted to register for some programs but could not, because he did not want to get his visa and then be unable to attend them.

You cannot make any solid plan, because you will be thinking what if I get approved today. I remember there were some programs I wanted to subscribe to that would help my profession, but I could not, because I was thinking if I register for this program, it's going to take three months, and what if I get a notice, it means I have wasted my money registering. So I could not plan, because I do not know how long it's going to take. But if somebody knows that as I am making this application it's going to take six months, let's know it will take that time and work with that. Even if I get it on the fourth or fifth month, is still better, and I'll be able to make plans and not go through any emotional imbalance (*Mike, Married, Applied once, wait time-7 months*).

Reasons for the Prolonged Processing Time

Participants were asked what they felt the reasons for the delays were. Several participants reported factors which they presumed were reasons for the delay they experienced. Seven participants noted that IRCC not having enough visa officers to handle the applications at hand, combined with the effect of COVID-19 restrictions, could have been a reason for the delay. For instance, Mike shared that he read on the website that some visa officers would be working from home due to COVID-19 restrictions and that was given as one of the reasons for the delayed processing time.

I will say the pandemic affected the application processing time, in the sense that I read from their website that the officials some of them work from home and they don't come to office every day, so that will also factor in how long it will take to process my application. So, they gave it as one of the reasons that could make the processing time slow (*Mike, Married, Applied once, wait time-7 months*).

For Oyinlola, she didn't know the specific reason for the delay, but she would advise that they find a solution to the problem of delayed visa.

First of all I don't know if they are understaffed, I don't know if the workload is too much on them, or...I really do not know the reason for the delays in processing visa, but the number one advice I would give is that they should find a solution to the problem of delayed visa...if it's to employ more hands or speed up...because I hear that some of these verification process is actually what makes it long, like they have to verify some information (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*).

She further added that the Coronavirus pandemic was only used as an excuse as Canada student visa processing time was already bad, and the pandemic only made it worse.

I feel the whole pandemic actually played a major role in increasing the delay time, but to be fair I think Canada student visa also takes time too compared to other countries, and the pandemic made it worse. So, it was already a bad situation that became worse (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*)

Actions to Reduce Waiting Time

Participants noted steps and actions they took to get a response from IRCC during the waiting time. Halima shared that she was constantly sending mails to the Nairobi office where her applications were being processed. She said;

After applying, it is on IRCC portal that you can send a mail for an update of our application, after...I think 12 or 11 weeks, so I think when it was around towards the ending of May, I started sending a mail to like Nairobi, on an update on my application, cause I was supposed to resume in May and I deferred so my current admission was for September. I already wrote in my statement of purpose that my admission was for May, but my visa did not come out, so I sent Nairobi an email that September was already approaching. I kept on emailing them constantly, like 2-3 emails a day, until I got a response from IRCC on the 2nd of June, to check for an update on my portal (*Halima, Single, Applied once, Wait time-4 months*).

Similarly, Oyinlola also shared that she did not know what to do because she had heard that if you send an email, you could get rejected because you did not give them enough time to assess your application. So out of frustration, she sent a web form, expressing herself passionately and explaining how she had deferred her admission three times.

I did not know what to do because I have heard funny stories that they will say if you pressure them, they will send you an email saying you did not give them enough time to assess your application, so you've been rejected or whatever, so I was just so confused. I now messaged school to ask if I could defer again, and they were like I cannot defer one more time, that if I do, I have lost my admission... I sent them (IRCC) a web form, and I was so passionate in my message, because at this point I had mixed emotions-anger, pressure, ermm...frustration...I was like why do I have to wait so long? So I just expressed myself and explained everything, how I've deferred my admission thrice, how I need it and everything, and that was on a Friday. Then on a Monday, I just saw the email that my application has been approved. I literally cried, I'm not joking...I was like finally, thank God I took the initiative to do that (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, Wait time-5 and 7 months*).

In comparison with other Countries

Participants were asked how the Canadian student visa process differed from other countries. Participants expressed how the UK had a better system, which was faster and more

straightforward. Oyinlola described the UK process to be straightforward, with an expedited visa route for a fast visa processing.

For UK, it is pretty straightforward. If you bring the required documents you are quite sure you are going to get your visa because you brought the documents, but when you're talking of Canada, it is so uncertain. The uncertainty with Canadian visa is overwhelming, you could literally do everything right, but they will just find a reason. Is it family ties? They always use that excuse of family ties. Also, there's this expedited visa they do in the UK that I know of, that you pay and you can get your visa in err I think 2 or 3 days. So yeah those are major differences that are not available in the Canadian system. (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, Wait time-5 and 7 months*).

Mike also agreed that the UK had a faster process compared to Canada, as he knew a friend that had applied for a UK visa, and didn't wait so long.

One of my friends applied for a Visa to UK and then he did not take them as long as it took me with Canada. The application was fast, and got the decision quickly, so that was part of what kept me wondering that something could be done to also fast track the processing time in Canada. UK might be doing something I might not know, but the outcome shows that their applications are faster than that of Canada (*Mike, Married, Applied once, Wait time-7 months*).

In comparison with the United States, Anna shared that their process was worse than Canada.

I think their own is even worse than Canada...because you can go with all your documents right, everything complete and then they'll say I'm sorry you are not this thing, and all those kind of things. I've heard different stories, I know someone that did it nine times, and it was on the ninth time that he went to the US (*Anna, Single, Applied once, Wait time-3 months*).

Some participants had a different perspective. For instance, Oyinlola supposed that although the United States was not better in giving pointless excuses to students, they were at least faster than Canada.

Like in the US, you just have an interview, and on the day of your interview you know your fate. I don't know if I really like that...but it's fast, I mean you know your fate and you can apply immediately again for another one. But the whole idea of not knowing where you stand, it gives you a lot of emotional disturbance.... US is not any better in giving

funny excuses but then they are faster than Canada (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, Wait time-5 and 7 months*).

In contrast, Adenike who was previously denied a student visa in United States, stated that she prefers the Canada visa system to the United States system.

For US you need your I-20, you need to appear for a visa interview, and get denied or approved on the same day during the interview. Overall, I prefer the Canadian visa system though, if you are able to provide the accurate documents, then you will get the visa. It has more advantages (*Adenike, Married, Applied Once, Wait time-2 months*).

In comparison with Australia, only one participant was familiar with their process. Anna shared that they also had a fast process just like the United Kingdom:

Then, Australia...I know someone who went to Australia, it's just like the UK, have all your documents complete, and you will be fine. I hope Justin Trudeau or Sean Fraser will see this (*Anna, Single, Applied once, Wait time-3 months*).

Overall, participants revealed that the processing time was long, and the wait time listed on the IRCC website was not always accurate. Participants reported that although the COVID-19 restrictions made it more difficult to assess some important documents required for their visa application and also increased the visa processing time, the Canadian study visa application process was already a convoluted process that was exacerbated by the pandemic. These delays further affected their personal plans which caused life delays for some, and generated a number of stress-related emotions—which will be explored next.

4.1.3 Emotional Stress

Participants shared the emotions and feelings they felt during the application process, particularly stress, anxiety and uncertainty. They primarily attributed their emotional turmoil to the prolonged wait to learn the verdict on their visa application, and shared how these emotions

and feelings have shaped their overall impression of the Canadian student visa application process.

Rita in clear terms described the emotional turmoil she experienced.

That was a disaster to be honest...Like I can remember I was unable to eat, I was always waking up in the middle of the night praying to God, that God can they please answer me and give me my visa, because I'm totally fed up. I was crying constantly, every day I was thinking. My Dad was like, 'Oh my God, this girl is going to kill herself', I said no. Like six months, like that is just too much for me. I was thinking about my life, my whole life was on hold. I was sending message to IRCC like thrice a week (*Rita, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Aisha also shared that she was anxious, scared and worried during the waiting period, and would not want to experience such again.

That period I was waiting, I was so worried and it was not something easy. A lot of people were just sharing their previous rejections on the group I was, and I was scared, because I had spent a lot of money and did not know what to do to if I got rejected, so I was so anxious. So I think by early November, I got my passport request and I was so happy, because I had waited for almost eight months for it. I do not want to experience such again, I have never been so worried and scared about something in my life like I was then (*Aisha, Applied once, wait time, 8 months*).

Participants also mentioned the feelings of disappointment and discouragement experienced by students whose application are denied after prolonged waits. Mike also shared that waiting for the visa could not only disrupt your plans, but also cause emotional imbalance while you wait, which leads to utter disappointment when the visa application gets denied. He stated:

It disrupts a lot of people's plan, you have to stop somethings because you are hoping to transition soon. And it could be unfortunate, especially for people that their applications are not approved. I mean after going through the emotional imbalance and making some decisions, stopping some plans or missing out on some opportunities, while considering your application and then you don't get approved. It is going to be an utter disappointment (*Mike, Married, Applied once, Wait time-7 months*).

Likewise, Aisha shared that most graduate students especially those that are self-sponsored, become discouraged to reapply when their visas get rejected because of the prolonged waiting

time, and tend to try other countries. She also added that if she knew she was going to wait for eight months to get her visa, she might have not applied for it.

I even feel like most people that get rejected do not even reapply. At least from that group, and we were over 20,000 on the telegram group, and most people that got rejected did not even try to reapply. At least most graduate students, even three of my friends that got rejected just went to the United Kingdom and Germany. Most times it's the undergraduate students that tend to reapply because it is their parents that are sponsoring them and their parents are paying for it, and maybe graduate students that their parents are sponsoring too. Those that are self-sponsored just try another country, and most graduate students have admission in other countries, so they just go try it, because most times you have already waited for up to six months, so to start reapplying and all, you just get discouraged. The truth is if I knew I'll wait 8 months, I might have not applied, because that's long and draining (*Aisha, Applied once, wait time, 8 months*).

Participants were asked to share their overall impression of the visa application process and how they would describe it to anyone who asks. Participants variously described the visa application process as stressful (particularly the mental, and psychological stress), tough, emotionally draining, frustrating, tiring, and most importantly, that it requires a lot of patience. Rita shared her overall perception, saying she would describe the process to anyone as a stressful one that requires patience, as well as emotional and mental preparations, as applying for a Canadian visa can frustrate a person.

I'll just tell them that they should be mentally prepared, because applying for a Canadian student visa can frustrate one's life...because ...that's strenuous. I will just tell them to be mentally and emotionally prepared, because they are going to take you to a different whole level entirely. You need to have patience, because like...be ready to calm down, because this thing can take more than 3 months, more than 4, 5 months depending on the visa officer handling your file and when the application was submitted. Overall it's a stressful process (*Rita, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Anna similarly mentioned that it was a stressful process, and would inform anyone who asks about the process to prepare for mental stress, to have a plan B, and to not put all their hopes on the visa.

It is just a stressful process and everyone should just prepare for that mental stress and try not to be 100 percent, I mean try not to put all your eggs in one basket in that sense, just in case, they should have a plan B. I will just tell anyone that it can potentially be stressful, and then they should just prepare for that mental stress, because it is mostly mental stress,

when you are waiting and you do not hear anything (*Anna, Single, Applied once, Wait time-3 months*).

Also, Oyinlola stated that the process affects you psychologically and emotionally, and could be overwhelming, depressing and also tiring. But you'll feel happy when you get your visa.

It affects you psychologically from my perspective. It was just a very tiresome process, a very depressing moment, like it affects you emotionally, that's just the best English I can use right now. So yeah, that is just the overall impression for me, its tiring and all that, but at the end of the day you will feel happy when you get it, but the whole process could be something else, yeah (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*).

Favour shared that the process requires patience, but it is not difficult or tough to get through, and is actually worth it when you get to Canada:

Overall, I mean after getting here, I think the whole process looks like such a big deal when you are back home in Nigeria, but when you get here, I kind of tend to say the whole process is actually worth it. Like just be patient that is just the thing, have all your documents and be patient. It is not so difficult or tough to get through (*Favour, Married, Applied once, Wait time-3 months*).

Similarly, Peter reiterated Favour's claim about patience with his impression of the Canadian student visa process, stating:

In all it is worth it, but it can be time consuming and energy draining trying to put everything together, you will definitely experience lots of emotions during the waiting period, but don't just get overwhelmed. Just be hopeful and in the end it will turn out well, but in all, it's a rollercoaster process, you don't know what to expect, you just have to apply with the right documents and wait patiently till you get a good feedback (*Peter, Married, Applied twice, Wait time- 3 and 6 months*).

In summary, participants' experiences and overall impressions showed that the Canadian visa process was experienced as stressful, psychologically, mentally and emotionally draining, overwhelming, tiring, time-consuming, frustrating, and as a result the process requires a great deal of patience.

4.2 Social Networks and Capital.

The importance of networking and social capital was widely mentioned among the participants as very important—given the complexity of the process. This includes conducting proactive research and gathering the right information about the process, the required documents needed for the visa application and how to submit these documents the right way, and for some, knowing the immigration consultant to contact. Students stated the importance of going beyond the information on the IRCC website (which some found incomplete), and getting information from informal sources (such as talking to others who have gone through the process or seeking information from others online via YouTube and Telegram groups). Students also reported getting information and assistance from immigration agents/consultants and the lack of support from the university in actually negotiating the visa application process, in contrast to some other universities in Canada and other universities in countries like the United Kingdom.

4.2.1 Importance of informal sources of Information

The participants reported that the prior information they had or not, helped or delayed their application. Participants were asked how they gathered this information, and a lot of them noted online sources, tips from previous applicants and social media sources like YouTube and Telegram groups.

Participants were asked how they had gathered the prior information for the visa application process. Favour shared how her friend influenced her decision to study in Manitoba and also provided guidance through the application process.

I would say online, and if you know anybody that has gone through the process. Like for me choosing Manitoba, I have a friend we finished from school together, so in fact Manitoba was not really my first choice, I had other schools in Toronto, but he kept on encouraging me to choose Manitoba, and he explained the benefits to me and guided me

through the application process. So that's part of information gathering. So, if you have somebody as well that you can talk to and can guide you...that will be good also. So anywhere you can gather it from, online, in-person, relatives, close friends that are already in Canada, it is a good source (*Favour, Married, Applied Once, Wait time-3 months*).

Anna also explained how she had gathered information from previous applicants, which helped her prepare.

I did not know anything but I did my research and I asked questions a lot, especially from people who had done it before, either gotten it or had not gotten it, to know what mistakes they made. So, I was prepared, I prepared myself with information... I asked questions, I used to disturb people a lot (*Anna, Single, Applied Once, Wait time-4 months*).

Mike also confirmed Anna's experience on how the information from previous applicants made the process easy.

Before I applied, I made enquiry from people that had applied before, so that I can get information on where they have made mistakes, or what could easily fast track my own application. First of all, I made the research, then I started the application. It was during the process I discovered that they were asking me specific things and I do not need to bother so much on all the things. So, the information I got assisted me and made the process easy for me (*Mike, Married, Applied once, wait time-7 months*).

Aisha shared how she joined social media groups to learn about the process and how to organize her application, and also the emphasis on finances:

You know I was in a Telegram group and I said I watched a lot of YouTube channels. They talked about getting all your documents, writing a good Statement of Purpose, and your finances. Like finances is important, they were just emphasizing that. The way you organize the application and your finances. Make sure your sponsor is close related to you, if not they should be able to prove why they want to sponsor you (*Aisha, Single, Applied Once, wait time-8 months*).

Rita, also shared how she used social media to gather information, and explained the importance of watching YouTube videos.

Before I applied, I did some findings on YouTube, like I did my findings. You don't expect me to just say I want to go to Canada one day, you have to be preparing for that. If you want to apply for a visa, just go online and do your research. Do your research by yourself, there are many information online that people can use. Imagine, you can go to YouTube and just watch different videos, compare and contrast...like...at least if you watch 6 or 7 videos on YouTube on Canadian visa process and compare and contrast, you'll be able to

see what you need and what you don't need (*Rita, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Participants further explained how the prior information they had or did not have affected the outcome of their visa application. Peter, who had his first visa application rejected, shared that his lack of information cost him time and money because he had to hire an immigration agent in his second application.

I did not have any information about the process, I really wish I did...it would not have cost me time and money. But the second time I applied, I knew that Canada visa requires lots of documents and you need to be patient, also you need to do a lot of research before applying and look for those that have previously applied and asked questions (*Peter, Married, Applied twice, wait time-3 and 6 months*).

In the same vein, Aisha shared how the prior information she had gathered helped her get her visa, and prevented her from incurring extra costs, and also helped her get familiar with the process, as she's now able to provide guidance to new applicants.

I will say the prior information I had helped me, I knew what to do, and I was always asking questions from others that have gone through the process. It also prevented me from spending extra money on an agent, and now I'm really familiar with the process, I have also provided guidance for like two people now. All those knowledge made me sure of my application, like I just felt I did the right thing and was hopeful of getting the visa (*Aisha, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

4.2.1 Going beyond the information provided by IRCC

As a follow up question, I asked participants why they needed to do extra research when the information on visa application process was provided on IRCC website. Most of the participants had a lot to say. Peter shared that the information on the website was not sufficient, and it was still very important to inquire from informal sources. He noted:

You need to do an in-depth research and not just read what is on the IRCC website alone, because the information there is not sufficient. You need to ask people who have gone through the process and get enough knowledge. So, I felt the first rejection was misinformation on my part, maybe if I had more information it would have been easier for

me, but I just used the information on IRCC website, and really didn't ask people. I get it was overexcitement, I just went straight to apply and felt I'll get it because of my funding. People I told after my first application were like, oh that's a big mistake you should have done this and that, like finances is important...and so on and so on. (*Peter, Married, Applied twice, Wait time-3 and 6 months*).

Similarly, Oyinlola explained how using only the information provided on IRCC website led to her first visa refusal, and how the disparity in information was the major difference between her first and second application. She shared:

I feel like the first time I applied if I had spoken to people more, I won't have submitted my application with just what the website asked me to use. I wouldn't have done that, because everybody I told were like 'what! You submitted a Canadian visa without letter of sponsorship? And I'm like it's not on IRCC website, and they are like, so? So I know information actually played a major role, if I had that knowledge I could have done it on my own and I probably would have gotten it, because I really didn't see the difference with what the person I asked to help me did and what I did, the only difference was information, they had more information (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*).

In sum, participants expressed that getting external information from previous applicants, social media groups and YouTube 'How to apply for a Canadian study visa' videos were all helpful in their application, and that it wasn't sufficient to rely only on the information provided on IRCC website.

4.2.3 Information from immigration agents/consultants

Some participants reported that information received from immigration agents and consultants were also helpful during their visa application process. Oyinlola shared how she received helpful information from an immigration agent after her first application got rejected.

I waited for about 3 or 4 months, or about 5 months, and when I did the whole biometrics thing, they rejected me two weeks after. I was so devastated because I felt I had waited for over four months, and I got rejected...just imagine, I was like this isn't making sense though. So that was how I got rejected and had to defer my admission again, then I started the whole visa application process from the scratch, but this time around I employed the help of an agent, I didn't do it on my own but I was involved in the whole process. This

second time around I included all the extra documents...the person that helped me told me to submit the same statement but for a longer month...we printed the first one for four months, the second one was then for eight months (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*).

Similarly, Peter recounted the information he received from an immigration agent after the rejection of his application.

I got rejected the first time, then I had to consult an agent the second time to help with the application. he was like I was rejected because I applied with only my funding letters and did not add any other financial statement and I also applied with my wife and son, so he told me to add my statement of account. I didn't really have all these information, and I applied with only my funding letter, because I had enough funding to cover my family, according to IRCC's site, so it was not like I did it wrong, but maybe a bank statement is important. (*Peter, Married, applied twice, Wait time-3 and 6 months*).

Halima also shared how an immigration agent confirmed the documents needed for the application process, when she unsure about what was required.

It wasn't really easy, we did not really know what to submit precisely, until the agent told us we have to submit the statement of purpose, ...statement of account, we were confused, we didn't know the particular statement of account to use, because my Mum have her personal account and her business account. So we were not sure of the one to use... (*Halima, Single, Applied once, Wait time-4 months*).

In sum, some participants found immigration agents helpful in providing information, and also during the reapplication process after a visa rejection.

4.2.4 Lack of support from the University

Participants stated that the University was helpful with deferrals and updating admission letters, but when it came to their visa applications they all stated that the University did not play any role nor provide support with their visa applications.

For instance, Favour stated that the University of Manitoba was fast in responding to her mails and helpful in deferring and sending an updated admission letter.

I had to defer my admission at a point. The school was really helpful with that, my department really assisted me in that aspect, helping me to defer my admission. And I kept in touch with them, so they were also keeping me aware of what was going on and all. That's just it. So I'll say they were helpful, cause I sent a mail about deferring, they sent me an updated admission letter, like it was so fast, there was no hassle or anything, which was very good (*Favour, Married, Applied once, wait time-3 months*).

Similarly, Mike confirmed the prompt response received from the University of Manitoba, and how they easy it was to send them an email.

I sent emails to the admission officers, because due to COVID 19 restrictions the border was closed. So, I explained that my country was part of the countries that could not travel to Canada and asked how these restrictions would affect my status. I was glad they responded, and said if I need further assistance I should let them know. With that, it was always easy to send an email to them if I'm confused about a particular decision or situation, and they provided responses (*Mike, Married, applied once, wait time-7 months*).

Asides providing information regarding students' admission, participants felt that the University of Manitoba did not provide support to students during the visa application process nor reach out to them for updates, making students feel alone. For instance, Anna stated;

The University was not helpful at all. They didn't even try to even reach out to ask, okay how is your application? Like how's the visa process going? I think basically you are on your own until you get the visa. That's the vibe that I got from them (*Anna, Single, Applied Once, Wait time-4 months*).

Adenike also reiterated Anna's response, as she lacked support from the University of Manitoba during her visa application process, and also believes the school does not provide support for foreign students with their visa.

I wouldn't really say I got so much support like that, and I don't think they provide so much support, well I may be wrong, but they don't really provide support for foreign students with their visa, except providing your admission letter, which is normal, any school would do that. So I didn't really get that much support (*Adenike, Married, Applied Once, Wait time-2 months*).

Similarly, Aisha stated that the school could do more than giving admission, and would like them to follow up with students and provide guidance.

The school didn't provide any help, except that one email where they wrote the next steps for us to take after getting admission. They should please try to do more on this, since they give admission, they can do some follow up and help provide guidance. I don't think they know anything about the visa process, they just give admission and go their own way visa (*Aisha, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Comparing the University of Manitoba with other universities

In comparison with other universities in Canada, participants stated that some universities provide support to students with their visa application. Rita stated that other schools like Thompson Rivers University provide guidance to visa students during their applications, and she has not seen anybody that got help from the University of Manitoba with their visa. She stated:

Like I can remember, I was in a group for visa students and people were talking about how their school was helpful for them, the way the school was helping them contact IRCC on their behalf because of their visa. I don't think University of Manitoba does that, I don't think they do. I'm not sure, I might be wrong, but I don't think so. I've not seen anybody speaking out that University of Manitoba helped them with their visa...No. But other schools, I think like Thompson River University, they're helping their students who are trying to apply for a visa (*Rita, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Another participant, Aisha, also shared that some schools such as University of Windsor work with immigration consultants that help international students with their visas, and believed the University of Manitoba could adopt such ways or have personnel at the international centre that could guide foreign students with their visa applications.

I think some schools have immigration consultants that helps international students, like university of Windsor, they can do something like that also. It will be nice to have someone in the international student centre that can provide guidance for international students on their visa and the documents they need visa (*Aisha, Single, applied once, wait time-6 months*).

In comparison with the United Kingdom, Oyinlola stated that universities in the UK helped students with their applications with the CAS (Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies) number, which allows the university to sponsor a student's visa application by confirming that the student has an unconditional offer in the university. She suggests that if the universities in UK can help students get their visas, the University of Manitoba should also play a more active, facilitative role.

I absolutely feel the universities here don't do anything, like compared to the UK where they have this whole CAS thing were the universities play a role in supporting you. I just feel here, they don't help in anyway. The only way they'll help is if you say okay you need an enrolment letter, they'll give you that. It just feels like they have no say, like they really have nothing to do, they don't do anything, and they had no role to play. I don't know, sometimes it's very annoying because I feel like if UK can have that system, why can't it be operational here universities is to be more involved in the study visa process (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*).

Oyinlola further shared in clear term how the university can get involved with students' visa applications just like in the UK.

Involved how? For example if students have gotten admission into your university, you could have a say in the whole visa processing thing... Like university can act like a sponsor, when I mean sponsor I don't mean they take care of your bills, it just shows that these students are actually coming to your university, you can provide maybe a student number that links you to the university. But yeah, they should be an extent in which you having an admission influences the probability of you getting a visa. So I feel the universities can actually help a lot, the way UK have it in their system, I feel it's also achievable here. So yeah (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*).

Overall, participants' shared experiences reflected that the University of Manitoba did not play any active role in assisting students with their visa application, and participants felt that the university was not only not helpful, they also did not show concern nor ask students about their visas. The lack of formal visa application support from the university, combined with the dearth of information on the IRCC website, led applicants to seek information and guidance from previous applicants either through personal networks or social media sources.

4.3 Discrimination

Participants highlighted forms of possible discrimination against African students from the bureaucracy, in terms racial discrimination—being black, coming from an African country, as well as intersecting axes of discrimination such as class, and marital status. Participants felt various social categories particularly social class and marital or familial status could put students at a disadvantage while applying for a student visa.

4.3.1 Racial Discrimination

Several participants underlined the presence racial discrimination associated with the waiting time, documentation required and outcome of a student's visa application. When asked about the possible reasons for the prolonged processing time and delay, Anna revealed that besides COVID, and limited IRCC staffs, there were other reasons for the delay as there is also the uncertainty when you are Black and from Africa, which could lead to possible discrimination.

Maybe without COVID it would have come out earlier, but then I don't know, there's also the uncertainty when you are 'Black' and you are from 'Africa', there's always that possible discrimination that you think may or may not affect your application. But there's always that question mark, like is this why? So, I don't know, if there was no COVID-19 there are still other things that kind of put us at a disadvantage when it comes to international relations, applying to other countries. Like it makes no sense, they're just stressing people unnecessarily, and this is not how they treat other people from other countries, I guess it's just Africans that they treat like this. Like before you come and study, you're already stressed out. In a system that works you shouldn't be hoping for anything, because you know that two plus two is four, like if you put this in, you'll get this out. Like I said there are other factors that affects how they process Nigerians applications, and other African's applications. Well I've found out that it's not so friendly here. I thought Canada was a friendly place, but I've realized that it's not very friendly. And there are people who are considering other options (*Anna, Single, Applied Once, Wait time-4 months*).

Likewise, Rita also stated that Nigerian students experienced more visa delays for up to 6 months compared to other students from countries outside Africa. She also added that students

from Nigeria get rejected without good reasons, and some will now have to get a judicial review before getting the approval.

I waited for a whole 6 months to get a visa, while other countries outside Africa get their own visa in like 2 months...just because we are Nigerians they delay us. That was a disaster to be honest, I will just say it's just too strenuous for us in Nigeria. I can say there were many people that their visas were rejected, and they had the financial capability to come to Canada, like their parents had enough finance for them to study in Canada, but they were just rejected with like...without good reasons. That's too much...then these people will now go for a judicial review, like they will sue the visa officer, and then IRCC will be like they are sorry, then they will now approve the visa, which is bad (*Rita, Single, Applied once, wait time-6 months*).

Just like Anna and Rita, Oyinlola also shared the same perspective with Anna. She ascertained that the Canadian student visa process was particularly tough for Nigerians

People have different experience, some people's processing time was faster and all of that, but from my personal experience, I feel like the Canadian student visa process could be really overwhelming and tough for Nigerians, I don't know about any country but particularly for Nigerians, it's really tough because sometimes it feels like they just want to make you wait. (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, wait time-5 and 7 months*).

Another important form of discrimination was pointed out by Mike, regarding where visa applications were processed. He had noticed that his application was processed outside Nigeria, in Kenya which would be another cause for visa delays.

Another thing that I observed before I got my Visa was that I had to waybill my passport to the federal capital, possibly to another country. I think Kenya, so that means this thing can't be processed in my country. I don't know if it's a national problem with my country, because why will the Government of Canada want to grant citizens of my country a visa and it has to be processed in another country. Maybe it has to do with the government of my country anyway. So if that aspect can be resolved, it will be good. Just imagine like 500 people having to send their passport to Kenya to be approved, going through that distance, it takes time. Sometimes 2-3 weeks, because it's going outside the country. So if we can have like 2 or 3 offices where visa applications are processed within the country, it will also fast track the process (*Mike, Married, Applied once, wait time- 7 months*).

Rita also highlighted the halt of the Nigerian Student Express (NSE) was unfair to students who had written IELTS and hoped to get a response in good time.

There was even one thing IRCC did, they told us that once you write IELTS, like the process was going to take like 2-3 weeks. IRCC started this thing for like one month and they stopped this thing entirely. The minister of something came to Nigeria, and they agreed on the whole process that Nigerian students should be writing IELTS, and after they write the IELTS, their processing time is not going to be long, like 2 or 3 weeks. But like after 3 months of this they just changed the whole thing. I know a lot of people that wrote this IELTS and they waited more than 5 months or 4 month...they need to keep to their promise (*Rita, Single, Applied once, Wait time-6 months*).

In sum, participants felt that students applying for a Canadian student visa from Nigeria were subjected to racial discrimination which negatively affects their waiting time and the outcome of their visa.

4.3.2 The intersection of other student characteristics and the visa process

Participants noted that visa applications are processed differently across various intersecting forms of social identities particularly class and marital/familial status. Although IRCC permits students with spouses and/or children to apply with the student, participants shared that students who had spouses and/or children could have their visas rejected because they are unable to prove their home ties to their country, which is used to show that they will return to their country upon completion of their program. Peter noted that while applying the second time after his first rejection, the immigration consultant advised not to apply with his spouse and child in order to prove his home ties. This would show that he still has immediate family members back home, and would be prompted to return home after his studies. He, however, wondered why he could not apply with his family members at once, and had to wait till he arrived in Canada before submitting an application.

The agent was like when I get here I should apply for my wife and son to join me, but I was like, why can't we all just apply together from here, and he said it's because I have to prove home ties and show I have a family to return to. The whole thing is just somehow, like I thought Canada needed people here and skilled workers, so why are they scared of students not returning to their home country? I just even applied for my family a few months back and I'm waiting for a response... People who have spouses and children, like the students that want to come with their families, they should make it easy for them to all come together in the first place, without trying to challenge their home ties. Eventually those that want to go back will go back, and those that will stay in Canada will stay. They should just make it easy for students with immediate families, so their spouse can work and support them. *(Peter, Married, Applied twice, Wait time- 3 and 6 months)*.

Peter also added that it felt like students with spouses and children were discriminated against by both the schools and IRCC as they were not included in their plans and policies.

It feels like international students with spouses and children are discriminated here, because both IRCC and the schools don't even think about them in their plans or policies or whatever. They should consider that and make it easy for everyone *(Peter, Married, applied twice, Wait time- 3 and 6 months)*.

Adenike, who is also a married student and was unable to apply with her spouse, also shared that it would be easier if married students were able to apply with their spouses while applying for their student visa.

For those that are married, they should allow them apply with their spouse, cause of the spousal work permit. They should just allow the spouse get the work permit when the student applies for student visa, it just makes life easier *(Adenike, Married, Applied Once, Wait time-2 months)*.

In terms of social class, some participants felt that the type of documents required to prove financial self-sufficiency were biased in favour of those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. They noted that for some applicants, it could be challenging to get the necessary financial documents as well as documents to prove home ties, particularly the landed property documents, as some students who can sponsor themselves might not have landed properties. Oyinlola stated that the real issue might not be your actual ability to fund your study plans, but rather, your inability to prove that you can, to the visa officer, because you lack the documents they want.

To be fair, the biggest challenge with getting all these documents is you might actually not have them. Like for example, someone that wants to study in Canada...say their parents are not too wealthy, are they supposed to steal money and put it in the bank? or if their parents don't have like a company...I'm saying a company cause I'm saying oh an exhaustive list like 'oh your corporation document, or say I'm the CEO, what if the person's parent doesn't have that? Or you don't own any landed properties? Like these could be real issues, the issue is not even getting the document, the issue is that we don't even have that. These are real issues, because you might be able to fund yourself in Canada but it might not look like that with just your cash flows (*Oyinlola, Single, Applied twice, Wait time-5 and 7 months*).

Aisha also mentioned that some students might not have relations who could help provide for a landed property, and she also did not think the document was important to prove finances.

The documents, it's really a lot and some people don't have some things like the landed property documents. Some people are orphans and no relation to help. I don't know though, but I think that is not necessary for you to study (*Aisha, Single, Applied Once, Wait time-8 months*).

In sum, participants felt that their race (being Black and coming from Nigeria), class, (being in a higher social class that enables you show landed properties and meet the required financial documents, and marital/familial status (choosing whether or not to apply with a spouse and/or children) affects the outcome of their visa. Their reported experiences suggest the presence of discriminatory policies within the system that affects the decision-making processes, and/or could reflect the biases of those making visa decisions. Furthermore, such participants felt that such biases seem reflected structurally in ways such as the limited number of visa offices in Nigeria (limiting processing capacity and prolonging processing times), and the change in visa requirements over time (the IELTS requirement even though English is the official language in Nigeria).

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

There have been several studies such as Boateng (2022) and Worae and Edgerton (2023), focusing on the challenges international students face upon arrival in Canada, and on the retention of international students after graduation. However, there have been relatively few studies of international students' pre-arrival challenges, especially regarding their visa application experiences, their challenges and concerns, and ways to support the recruitment of international students particularly in Canada. Findings from the present study contribute to the research on student visa application experiences, challenges and concerns, particularly for students from an African country like Nigeria. Previous research has focused on students from other countries like China and India (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). This thesis gives students from Nigeria the opportunity to share their concerns and experiences of the Canadian study permit application process, thereby helping to inform policy recommendations. Evidence from this research can help create awareness of this area of study, and serve as a basis for future studies to build on, and could be a resource in drafting proposals, reports, and policies aimed at addressing students' pre-arrival needs and increasing international (particularly African) student enrolments in Canada.

5.1 Discussion

This section relates the findings to the research question, and considers the findings in terms of the theoretical framework guiding this research (structuration theory and critical race theory) and describes how the findings from this research align and/or contrast with existing literature in this area.

The main sub-themes – “lives on hold,” “social networks/capital” and “discrimination” – highlight how the complexities of the bureaucratic structure and current visa policies affect the student visa application experiences of graduate students applying from Nigeria. Overall, the majority of the students interviewed reported that they found the Canadian student visa application process for Nigerian graduate students to be quite complicated and rather opaque. They felt as though their *lives were on hold* as they first scrambled to meet onerous documentation requirements, and then waited for prolonged unpredictable periods of time for a response. The anxiety of prolonged waiting and the feeling of being in limbo until they received a decision lead to significant emotional turmoil for many. They also felt the information on the IRCC website was incomplete and that the university provided little or no formal support in the application process, so applicants turned to informal channels such as personal and digital *social networks and social capital* to help inform them on how to navigate the visa application process. A number of participants also felt that their applications were adversely affected by possible racial *discrimination* as a result of being Black and African, as well as some being further complicated by discrimination based on social class and marital/familial status.

5.2 Application of findings with the theoretical framework

5.2.1 Application of structuration theory to the research findings

Structuration theory provides a useful theoretical lens in understanding the experiences of international graduate students and their relationship with the Canadian bureaucratic structure. Structuration theory examines the duality of agents and structure interacting in the social system; the ‘agent’ includes groups and individuals and the ‘structure’ includes structuring properties such as rules, resources, and principles. In the present research the graduate international students are the agents who have the free will to make choices and choose the country in which they desire to

pursue higher education, and to which they send their applications. However, Giddens (1984) noted that individual choices are influenced by external structural factors, conditioning humans to achieve their desires and goals by adopting these structural factors, as the structure is used as a medium that effects the outcome of human actions.

Rules are formulas for actions, patterns to be followed, and doctrines that specify rights and obligations, such as laws, policies, and guidelines. The Canadian visa system operates according to various laws, guidelines and policies determining who gets a student visa, when you get it and how you get it. The visa documentation requirements are used to exert control over international students, as students who do not meet the documentation requirements are refused and those whose visas are approved are expected to meet the conditions of their visa and prove that they will return to their home country once the visa expires. Students' lives were put on hold while waiting for a response on their visa application and this affected their ability to make life choices (agency) and their wellbeing as they waited for the bureaucratic IRCC visa process (structure) to slowly render life-altering decisions. For example, students reported that they had to submit an application to request a visa after receiving admission to the university, they required several documents, and the omission of a particular document could result in a visa refusal. The Canadian visa application system operated by the bureaucratic structure also requires resources to be granted a visa. Goss and Lindquist (1995) noted that authoritative resources are used for controlling individuals' access to social, political and economic worlds. Students noted the importance of documents such as evidence of finances (up to 30,000 CAD) and landed properties during their application process, as major factors in determining the outcome of their visa application. The uncertainty, frustration and stress experienced by students while waiting for a response to their application is evidence of the effects of structural constraints on individuals as it

delayed their ability to enact life choices and deleteriously affected their mood and overall wellbeing.

Structuration theory further examines the connection of power and resources in social relations. Power is not a resource, but resources are means through which power is exerted (Giddens, 1984). Giddens (1984) noted that since individuals are not equally situated in the society, there is an uneven distribution of resources. Students in this study reported difficulty in satisfying the financial documentation requirements for their visa application. One participant, Oyinlola, shared that the application process was difficult for students who had no sponsor or proof of landed property documents. Hence, students who were not in the wealthy or affluent class are much less likely to be able study in Canada.

It is important to note that while there are structural constraints imposed by the visa system in Canada, there are also structural constraints in Nigeria that can influence student's choices and opportunities, in terms of their ability to successfully take on the process of applying for a student visa. Some Nigerians have access to more privileges and opportunities, making them less constrained, and better positioned to navigate the Canadian student visa process. This can be seen in students interviewed in this thesis, who were able to meet the visa requirements based, in part, on their relatively advantaged position within Nigeria's societal structure. These structural advantages include residing in the cities such as Abuja or Lagos, where the visa application and medical examination centers are located which reduces the need for extra travel expenses, having access to more information by being able to hire an agent, or being part of a privileged social class with access to networks of others who have gone through the process, having sufficient funds for tuition and living expenses, and having landed properties to prove their ties to their home country, among other factors. Hence, Structuration theory helps understand how structural constraints in

Nigeria impact students' agency and choices, limiting the opportunities of those from lower classes or less privileged backgrounds

5.2.2 Application of Critical Race Theory to the research findings.

Critical race theory provides a complementary lens for reflecting on the racial bias exerted by the structure that affects the outcome of Nigerian students' visa applications. Students reported that there could be possible discrimination from visa officers towards racialized Nigerian international graduate students, which may have resulted in excess scrutiny of their applications, prolongation of processing times, and decreased likelihood of success. The findings in this research also revealed that students with multiple social identities experienced different forms of intersectional discrimination. Married students and students with families reported that IRCC regulations on proving home ties makes it difficult for students to include their spouse and/or children in their initial application, without it affecting their intent to return to Nigeria upon graduation.

Students in this study revealed that landed property documents are required to prove that students have properties in their home country that they will return to after studies. Students reported that some students in lower/middle social class might have enough funds to study in Canada but may not have landed properties. This relates with Critical Race Theory explanations on how an individual's multiple social identity possibly subjects them to intersecting and compounding forms of discrimination.

Critical race theory emphasizes the importance of social capital among racialized groups in maneuvering discriminatory policies and systems (Yosso, 2005). Students in this study highlighted the importance of developing social networks and capital to gather relevant information and resources while navigating the visa application process. These include accessing

social capital via personal social networks (talking to family, friends, and acquaintances who had gone through the process), and digital social networks (seeking information from others online via YouTube, and social media groups and platforms). Participants felt it was necessary to activate such social capital and networks in order to access vital information (such as asking necessary questions) lacking on the IRCC website, as using only the information provided by IRCC could lead to a visa denial.

There are forms of capital that affects students access to opportunities and resources needed for a Canadian student visa, which could serve as an advantage or disadvantage to their application. Understanding these intersections sheds light on the various dimensions of inequality and discrimination students could possibly encounter. There are less privileged students in Nigeria who might desire to study in Canada, but do not have financial capital in terms of sufficient funds to study or lack of human capital with required education and experience to get a scholarship which assists in proving their financial capability. Also, students who lack the social or technological capital to gather information about the process are also disadvantaged. Similar to what was discussed in structuration terms in the previous section, Critical race theory highlights how such multi-dimensional and intersectional inequities are also important factors that contribute to differential visa outcomes.

5.3 Contribution to our Knowledge

The findings from this thesis identify a prolonged waiting time and the cumbersome documentation requirements as prominent challenges with student visa application processes. A study conducted by Hanson and Zambito (2003) in the United States, similarly revealed that international students are faced with obstacles and difficulties when trying to obtain a student visa, due to the strict guidelines and policies implemented by the immigration system. Consistent with

the present Canadian findings, they found the student visa application process in the United States to be strenuous, difficult, and lengthy, and also emphasized the importance of students portraying a strong ability to pay for their studies, as well as proper documentation to show student intentions to return to their home country after the completion of their studies (Hanson & Zambito, 2003). Similarly, Ogawa's (2009) study of the Australian student visa process revealed that student visa applications are subjected to strict criteria and conditions before being granted. More recently, El Masri and Khan (2022) studied Indian international students in Canada, and found that navigating the visa process was a key challenge for international students before they arrive in Canada. International students are faced with complex visa processes that are referred to as complicated and rigorous. Students reported being "confused, discouraged by the complexity and volatility of visa process, which includes navigating complex applications and paperwork, and long wait times" (El Masri and Khan, 2022:25). Their findings mirror the ways students in the present study described their experience of the Canadian student visa application process.

Findings from CBIE (2021) highlighted obtaining a study permit as a major challenge for students after gaining admission into a Canadian university. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) similarly revealed that a common pre-arrival challenge for international students is obtaining a visa and searching for the right information about the educational opportunities, culture of the host country, program of study and visa process. Satzewich (2015) identifies that bank statements, transcripts, birth certificates, employment letters, passport, university transcripts and degrees as some important documents used in a Canadian study visa application process. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) identified obtaining accurate information, gathering finances, as well as the difficulties in preparing visa documents and applying for a visa, as the three major pre-departure challenges for

international students. Financial sponsorship is a major challenge for international students, which includes proving adequate finances to cover tuition costs and living (Khanal and Gaulee, 2019).

The findings of the current study also highlight the complexities associated with obtaining a Canadian study visa, including gathering the right information on what to do and how to apply, especially given the importance of proper documentation (financial documents and proof of home ties) in determining the fate of study permit applications. Just as El Masri and Khan (2022:25) identified financial obligations to cover tuition and living expenses as a major challenge for students during the Canadian study visa application process, my research also revealed assembling the correct documents to prove finances as a major challenge for international students, furthermore, both studies included accounts from students of borrowing money to satisfy financial requirements.

In Calder and colleagues' (2016) study, international students described getting the right information resource as a major issue during their visa application process. They also described the information provided by the Canadian government as outdated and they suggested that the university help make information accessible. A recent study from CBIE (2021) found institutional websites, personal recommendations, social media sites and online forums to be the top information sources for international students coming into Canada, as the Government of Canada website was not considered an adequate resource for information. This is also aligns with findings in the present study, where participants reported the information on the IRCC website to be insufficient, while social media sites such as YouTube and Telegram and information from previous applicants were said to be great resources for gathering information. Participants also urged the university to assist in providing support and relevant information to help students with the visa application process.

Participants in the current study reported that the prolonged waiting time of the Canadian visa application process was a major source of uncertainty and stress. Sachdeva (2022) noted that the Canadian immigration process is faced with a large backlog of over 150,000 pending applications, causing students to defer to the next term. A third (34%) of these applications were international student applications, and were taking longer time than the expected processing time. ICEF Monitor (2022) reported that COVID-19 restrictions are a main cause for the extended processing time and delays in immigration departments in Australia, Canada, UK and the US. Plamondon et al. (2022) also highlighted the COVID-19 pandemic as a major factor for the extended processing times, causing students to wait for up to 200 days. In the current study, COVID-19 was stated by students as a probable cause of the delayed processing time, however some students believed that COVID-19 was not a major cause for the delay, but that it merely exposed and exacerbated the existing flaws associated with the visa system.

Nott (2021) shared findings from interviews with Indian international students who had applied for a Canadian student visa during the pandemic and were waiting for a response. The students noted that they struggled with problems such as the inability to get proper sleep, depression, and anxiety due to the visa processing delays, as some students had been waiting for close to 12 months (Nott, 2021). The students also reported that these delays caused uncertainty, constant pressure from their families who have invested in their visa application, fear of rejection and wasted money, time and efforts, inability to plan for the future because they were waiting for a decision. Findings from the present research on Nigerian international students similarly reflect the experiences of these Indian students. Nigerian students in this current study shared the various emotions and feelings they felt while waiting for a response on their visa applications; some of

which include feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and depression, inability to sleep or eat, and the inability to plan causing life delays.

CBIE (2021) noted that in their research, students who identified as Black reported the highest level of discrimination among all international students in Canada. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) particularly revealed that international students from Africa are noted to face a frustrating visa application process with lots of tensions. Plamondon et al. (2022) revealed that students from low- and middle-income countries like Nigeria are experiencing unusually long waiting times, which can be linked to systemic racism and discrimination. Plamondon, et al. (2022) emphasized that there is an overt anti-African racism that needs to be eliminated, hence there is need for IRCC to be transparent and accountable, and to ensure equitable policies and practices. Satzewich (2015) noted that it is subjective to denote visa officers as unerring, and bias will definitely creep in as visa officers use certain eligibility criteria and procedures to determine whether an applicant is deserving of a visa. Certain stereotypes influence visa officers' discretion, such as individuals with stronger passports and wide range of travel opportunities or applicants who have previous travel experience to other western countries (Satzewich, 2015). Satzewich (2015) believes that the possible biases that could influence a visa officer's decision-making process, are more socio-economically inclined than racially, but there is still a possibility of racial bias. IRCC's (2021) report on racism within the system also revealed that visa officers had stereotypes for Nigerians that could influence their decision-making process. Students in this current study pointed to discrimination as a probable cause of prolonged visa processing times. A participant in this research noted that being African could put you at a disadvantage while applying for a visa, so there is a probability that there is racial bias in the visa application decision-making process, which may be above and beyond the socioeconomic bias Satzewich (2015) noted.

The report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration of the House of Commons issued in May 2022, revealed that 65% of Canadian student visa applications from Nigeria were refused in 2021. Plamondon et al. (2022) note that more than half a million people were refused a study permit between 2016 and 2020. Students refused study permits, included exceptional graduate students who were already accepted into leading programs across Canadian universities, while some had received research grants and scholarships (Plamondon et al., 2022). Plamondon et al. (2022) further revealed that this was not only a tragedy for the students but also a big loss for Canada, as many of these students will go on to pursue their studies in another country due to the visa delays or rejections. Hanson and Zambito (2003) in the US, also noted that visa refusals have prevented several innocent students from fulfilling their study dreams. Participants in this present study revealed how several students in the social media groups they belonged to had reported refusals. A participant also noted that most graduate students in her telegram group that had their study visas rejected didn't reapply and just went on to study in another country.

Satzewich (2015) and Plamondon et al. (2022) report that the Canadian visa system is highly bureaucratized with somewhat arbitrarily differing rules and techniques being used by IRCC in the decision-making process, and that these differences suggest elements of racism. Students in the present study similarly felt that no two applications were the same, and that IRCC assessed applications differently, so there was no clear pattern on what to do to get approved or not, leaving the decision of getting approved to the discretion of the visa officer. The exorbitant financial requirement for the expedited visa program for Nigerian students, as well as the program's subsequent suspension after a short period, were identified as instances of racism in the reports by IRCC (2021), House of Commons (2022) and ASI (2022). This claim was also reflected in the findings of this present study, as a participant revealed that the NSE was no longer

operational, and students who had satisfied the NSE requirement still experienced long processing times and delays.

Findings from this study revealed that applications of Nigerian applicants were processed far away in Kenya, and students also had to travel long distance to visa application centres due to limited application centres in Nigeria. The ASI (2022) report submitted to the House of Commons in 2022, also indicated that several African students' applications were processed in Nairobi Kenya, and this visa office has recorded a high rate of student visa refusals. A major cause for these refusals is the visa office's limited capacity to handle the applications at hand due to lack of staff and resources. Satzewich (2015) and the House of Common (2022) report further attributed the sparsity of locations, capacity and funding of IRCC departments in Africa compared to the United States and Europe to racism. These was reported to diminish the ability of visa officers handling applications in this region to do a thorough analysis of student applications, leading to them often rejecting applications summarily.

The ASI (2022) report revealed that there is a high number of African students undergoing judicial review after the refusal of their visa due to the reasons for their refusals being fueled by visa officer's racial bias. Findings in this present study revealed that there is need for a detailed examination of visa applications, as there are many instances of students who meet the visa requirements but have their visas refused, and have to conduct a judicial review before receiving their approval. This was also mentioned in the IRCC (2021) report on the presence of subtle racism among visa decision-makers, with evidence of high success rate for students who challenged their visa refusal in the federal court.

El Masri and Khan's (2022) findings pointed to disreputable recruitment agents as sources of financial exploitation whom should be avoided if possible. They provide inaccurate information, and it is important that higher education institutions partner with trustworthy agents and recruiters that can serve as point of contact and resources for students while navigating the visa application process. In contrast, students in the present research found recruitment agents to be useful, and four out of the nine students interviewed used an agent in their application. However, students noted using an agent incurred extra costs, and their lack of information about the process was the major reason for using an agent. Bozheva (2020) notes that universities in Canada could employ the right immigration supporting agents that could help in international student recruitment and retention. This was also major suggestion for the University of Manitoba by most participants in this present study.

Doyle et al. (2016) found that immigration policies could restrict students' partners or children's access to visas, which could further influence their choice of country of study or delay their study plans. Participants in this current study revealed the difficulty in getting a visa when applying with a spouse or child/children. A participant further revealed how an agent advised him to apply alone from Nigeria, and apply for his spouse and child after he got to Canada. This was also the case of all the four married graduate students interviewed in this research, they all had to apply for their spouse after getting into Canada. They also reported that the UK has an easier student visa process for student parents to include their dependents, which attracts more student parents compared to Canada.

5.4 Policy Implications/Recommendations from the Study

To date, there has been little research on the study visa application experiences of international graduate students coming to study in Canada. There is research in other countries like

Australia and the United States addressing the complications in student visa policies in their countries, and how it can affect the development of international education in those countries (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Many international students whom are granted admission to Canadian universities never actually come to study in Canada. It is important to understand how the policies imposed by the bureaucratic structure affects the recruitment and retention of international students in Canada. Findings from this research indicate that students' general impressions of the Canadian study visa application process are that it is stressful, time-consuming, and requires a cumbersome rigorous documentation process that can be overwhelming. This suggests there is need for new policies and actions that will improve international students' experiences with the Canadian student visa application process, this seems particularly important for international students from African countries such as Nigeria.

Building on El-Assal's (2019) recommendation to diversify the source countries for international students coming to study in Canada, the present findings suggest that actions and policies that aid and support the arrival of international students from non-traditional source countries, and thus increase international student diversity in Canada, should be embraced by the appropriate stakeholders in international student recruitment and enrolment. These stakeholders include: the federal government/IRCC, the provincial and municipal governments and the post-secondary institutions across Canada.

The federal government developed the Regulated International Student Immigration Advisor (RISIA) in 2014, to create a regulated body that specialized in supporting the specific needs and sensitivities of international students (House of Commons, 2021). This created strict regulations as to who can offer visa application advice to students, as IRCC only deals with recognized/certified immigration consultants. The University of Manitoba does not have certified

immigration consultants at its International Student Centre, it is important that they remedy this as soon as possible. Although it may be difficult to compete with private firms hiring these types of consultants, the university should take the initiative to raise salaries for these positions to levels comparable with the private sector, especially given the revenue that international student tuitions generate, perhaps the Canadian government could subsidize their hiring costs. It is recommended that the federal and provincial government assist post-secondary universities in recruiting the authorized representatives who can provide a variety of supports for international students especially with their student visa applications and in understanding their role as an international student.

Getting the right information on how to apply and what to include in the student visa application appears to be an important pre-stage in the application process. Students reported that the information on the IRCC website was insufficient and that external resources such as personal networks and social media sources were more informative. Based on the current findings, it is recommended that the IRCC website be updated with clear information and guidelines on how to apply for a student visa from various countries. The website should not only include written guidelines, but also descriptive and demonstrative videos explaining the process in detail. Also, there should be a hotline international students can call while back home, to seek guidance and advice while navigating their visa application and other pre arrival needs. All this will help increase student enrolment in the institution and ease student visa application concerns. Additionally, virtual and/or in-person events with registered immigration consultants and representatives from Canadian universities in attendance, should be organized in sending countries. Prospective students can easily attend such events, and it will serve as a good source of information for their study plans. This will also help increase student enrolment in Canada.

Garcia-Sitton (2022) notes that the Canadian bureaucracy lacks transparency with their immigration policy and strategies. Findings from the present study also revealed that Nigerian students perceive that it is likely they are discriminated against by visa officers reviewing their visa applications. This study recommends the review of the current immigration policies, to address the complexities associated with the visa documentation stage and processing time of visas of Nigerian international graduate students. Findings from Satzewich's (2015) study revealed that visa officers are under pressure with various caseloads expecting decisions, and rigid working conditions that include spending long days to review applications and busy schedules. It is recommended that more visa officers, who are well-trained and unbiased, be hired to ensure student documents are vetted properly and efficiently without discrimination of nationality. Such increased staffing will lead to reduced processing times and thus to students getting swifter responses on their applications. Also, the stipulated processing time given on the IRCC website at a particular time should be strictly followed or adjusted to reflect reality. Such changes will reduce the uncertainty associated with the Canada student visa application process. International students will be more certain about the particular time they will receive a response, and will be able to plan accordingly. This will also help reduce prolonged unpredictable wait times, and the pressure associated with the process.

Most students revealed in this research that they had to defer their admission at least once, even though they had submitted their application early, which disrupted their travel plans and their academic programs of study. Visa officers should also prioritize students' resumption dates on their admission letters as much as their visa application submission date, when attending to visa applications. This will prevent unexpected delays for students, and will enable them to plan effectively. Another important finding from this research concerned the challenges married

students face. Married respondents reported that they were encouraged to apply without their spouses and children in order to demonstrate that they had a reason to go back home after their studies. This research recommends that married students and student parents should be encouraged to apply with their spouses and/or children once they have shown the adequate financial capability, without the visa officer doubting whether they will return home after their studies or not. Students applying with their spouse or immediate family should not be subjected to the fear of not having enough home ties or proving that they will return after their studies.

5.5 Study Limitations

This study also has several limitations and challenges that influenced the interpretation and findings. First, due to time constraints and available resources, the research was conducted with only nine participants at the University of Manitoba, thus potentially limiting the generalizability of the research findings. I had a difficult time recruiting participants for the study. The recruitment process lasted for five months (September 2022-January 2023), and only nine students were able to participate. Most graduate students did not respond to the recruitment process. Many were reluctant to participate in the research, some did not respond to the recruitment posts and several students who responded did not meet the recruitment criteria, while some responded to the recruitment process and consented to participate, but later withdrew before the interview process. The major aim of this research is not so much to generalize the findings, but rather to provide in-depth explanations and meanings and create awareness on an understudied subject, and to draw attention to the student visa application concerns of Nigerian graduate students seeking to study in Canada (at the University of Manitoba), and the complications associated with the bureaucratic structure of the IRCC student visa application process.

Also, the researcher noticed that some graduate students who were willing to participate were unqualified, because they failed to meet the recruitment criteria as they had applied for their visa from countries other than Nigeria. This was a common pattern among prospective PhD students, as they had completed their Masters in a different country from Nigeria and had applied for their student visa from the country where they completed their Masters. This study's recruitment criteria used this as an exclusion factor because there is a different documentation process, processing time, and application centre for students based on the country they are applying from. A Canada immigration law firm (CANADIM) noted in a recent article that students with existing visas on their passport or previous travel history are more likely to get their visas approved (Major, 2023). This gives students who have applied from a different country a different experience from those who applied from their home country who might not have a previous travel history or an existing visa.

5.6 Future Research Directions

Based on this study's findings and limitations, several future research directions can be suggested. First, future research should include a larger sample size to generate findings that could serve as a larger representation of graduate students, and their student visa application experiences, using either quantitative and/or qualitative analyses. This study can be extended to include graduate student visa experiences of students in other schools in Manitoba and/or other provinces in Canada, comparing and contrasting findings and highlighting other information in students' experiences that were not reflected in this research. This study focused only on Nigerian graduate student experiences, future research should consider graduate students from other countries in Africa, as well as other continents like Asia and Europe. It is also important to study the

experiences of undergraduate students, and highlight the differences and similarities between graduate and undergraduate students' Canadian study visa application experiences.

While I was recruiting participants for this study, several students (particularly Doctoral students) who would have loved to participate reached out but did not meet the criteria of applying from Nigeria. They had travelled to another country on a visitor or study visa, then applied from there. Some of the countries where these students applied were the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, Poland, and the United States. Future research can look into the experiences of Nigerian graduate students applying for a Canadian study visa from another country or generally investigating graduate students who applied from a country other than their country of origin. Findings from this research revealed that some students who get rejected do not bother to reapply for the visa, and choose to either remain in their home country, or apply to another country. This study further recommends more research to investigate the experiences of students whose Canadian visa got rejected and couldn't come to Canada.

Also, an important factor affecting student visa outcomes and extending visa delays was the COVID-19 pandemic. Most students interviewed in this research applied for their visa between March 2020 and February 2022 which was either during the pandemic or a little post pandemic, future research should further investigate student's experiences before and after the pandemic, comparing the experiences to understand the impact of COVID-19 on international student recruitment and retention in Canada. There is also need for research that analyzes the student visa policies imposed by IRCC, considering the differential visa application requirements across various countries. Future research should examine the application experience of immigrants who applied for either permanent residency or work permit outside Canada, especially from an African country. It would be useful to consider the similarities between the application process of the

different immigration pathways (study, work, permanent residency). This will also provide more evidence and comparison on the processing time, documentation processing, emotions and feelings experienced, as well as the relevant information sources that were used during the application process. Again, a major part of students' experiences and their impressions of the Canadian study permit application process were a result of the prolonged waiting time. Future research could build upon this, and recommend ways to reduce backlogs from applications and student visa processing time, as well as policy recommendations that would be useful in policy-making processes and advocacy.

Last, while many studies focus on international student retainment and recommend strategies to retain international students after graduation, there is comparatively little focus on how to support international student's recruitment and arrival in Canada, which would involve looking into students' pre-arrival challenges and concerns. Future research should consider these various challenges, such as: getting admission, navigating the visa application process, preparing finances for study, making housing arrangements, understanding the laws and culture of the host country and other required resources before studying in a different country.

This research examined a major part of Nigerian international graduate students' pre-arrival experience; from when they received admission till when their student visa was approved. Future research could also examine Nigerian students' arrival experiences; which includes their experience from when they got their visa approved until when they settled in Canada.

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APPENDIX I: Student Visa Process in Canada (study permit duration, cost, processing time)

Applying for a study permit

To study in Canada, every international student requires a study permit, and must apply for a study permit and get approved before coming into Canada. According to IRCC (2022a), a study permit is a document issued to foreign nationals (individuals who are not citizens or permanent residents of Canada), to study in a Designated Learning Institution in Canada. It is not a visa, and students from Nigeria would still require a visa, which would also be issued when the study permit is approved. It requires an application fee of 150 CAD for the visa application and 85 CAD for biometrics, making the total application fee 235 CAD for first time applicants to Canada (IRCC, 2022a). This is in addition to the application fees paid to individual universities.

The application is done either online at the Government of Canada/Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada website or on paper to be submitted at the closest Visa Application Centre (VAC) (IRCC, 2022c). Due to COVID-19, paper application is currently reserved for persons with any disability that prevents them from applying online and for non-national residents, refugees, or stateless persons who might not have access to the Internet and a computer (IRCC, 2022c).

Documents

According to IRCC (2022a), these are essential documents required to apply for a study permit.

-Proof of unconditional letter of acceptance from a school in Canada.

-Proof of identity, which includes a valid passport or travel document with at least two blank visa pages and a recent passport photograph, of the student and other applicants (spouse and/or children)

-Proof of financial support and sufficient funds to cover tuition and living expenses for at least one year in Canada. These include: proof of bank statement for at least four months before submission, a proof of funding/scholarship from within Canada, approved student or educational loan, a Guaranteed Investment Certificate (GIC) from a participating Canadian financial institution, a bank draft that can be converted to Canadian dollars, a letter from the person giving you money, proof of tuition and housing fees paid, or proof of an external scholarship. The minimum funds required is \$10,000 for living expenses aside from tuition for the student, and \$4,000 for the first additional family member and \$3,000 for the second additional family member (IRCC, 2022c)

-A letter of explanation is also required to explain your file, proof of home ties and why you should have your permit approved.

-IMM (Immigration Form) 1294 – “Application for Study Permit Made Outside of Canada” completely filled and signed by applicant and each person travelling with them. This form includes personal information such as name, date of birth, place of birth, country of origin, passport number, and available funds for study, education and employment history. However, a new portal has been created which does not include the IMM 1294 form, but the information in the form as questions on the portal.

Other Documents required to apply for a study permit from Nigeria, as noted in IMM 5832 E (CIC, 2015) are;

1. Previous passports to show travel history.
2. Academic documents such as recent transcripts, WASSCE/NECO results, all diplomas and post-secondary certificates, and NYSC certificate if applicable.
3. Reference letter from previous employer or academic.
4. Birth certificate for each immediate family member (parents, spouses, children, siblings, step/adopted siblings and parents, and children) whether they are requesting a visa or not.
5. Proof of business if applicable (business registration certificate, business bank statement of up to six months before submission date, tax clearance, license and financial documents).
6. Proof of employment if applicable, which includes a letter from current or past employer which indicates occupation, job description, position, salary, date of employment and attached pay slips for up to three months.
7. Marriage license/certificate if applicable.
8. Medical exam is also required, conducted in immigration approved hospitals.
9. Police certificate is also required, or could be requested by immigration later.

Steps in applying for a study permit

The first step is to get your documents ready, which includes all the documents listed above, then an online profile is created on the IRCC portal to apply online, or on paper by taking your documents to the nearest approved Canada visa centre, which, for Nigerian applicants, is either in Abuja or Lagos Nigeria (IRCC, 2022f). Paper application is applicable if a person is disabled and does not have online access or has a current visitor status in Canada, or a spouse or common law partner who is a NOC (National Occupation Classification) C or D worker, meaning

working in a job that requires a high school diploma or on-the-job training (IRCC, 2022f). For the online application which is recommended by IRCC, all documents must be scanned to create an electronic copy which then must be uploaded and submitted.

After completing the application, a processing fee of \$200 is required and \$150 for biometrics if they have not been previously submitted, or if the applicant is under 17 years old or older than 61 years. Altogether, the total application fee for a new applicant is \$350 (IRCC, 2022f). Now an applicant may proceed to submit online, making sure to check their status to confirm their application is properly submitted. After submitting the application, applicants are expected to book an appointment with their local Visa Application Centre (VAC) for biometrics (which includes fingerprinting and pictures for extra identification), and then ensure this gets updated to your profile. Processing time for applicants applying from Nigeria is at least 10 weeks, as at February 2023 (IRCC, 2023). Applicants have to keep checking their status until they get an approval, or denial.

The study permit is valid for the duration of your degree programme plus an extra three months, and would need to be extended if the programme is not completed within the expected programme duration (IRCC, 2022f). It is also important to note that aside from applicants applying for a study permit themselves, a licensed immigration agent, immigration lawyer, or relation could instead apply on behalf of an applicant, which would be duly indicated during the application, and might require an extra fee (IRCC, 2022f).

Nigeria Student Express (NSE)

The Nigerian Student Express was introduced by the Canadian Government in 2020, to aid Nigerians' study visa processing times, by introducing specialized systems to verify the financial

status of applicants and to ensure they took the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam (ICEF Monitor, 2021). Although from the IRCC website the current processing time for a study permit from outside Canada, is 13 weeks, excluding the time needed to give biometrics (IRCC, 2022a), some Nigerians still wait up to 4-6 months to get a decision on their application (Studyportals, 2022).

Parties Involved in the Study Visa Application Process

IRCC

IRCC is a department of the Government of Canada that processes temporary and permanent immigration documents (IRCC, 2022e). The IRCC offices are located in Canadian embassies, consulates and high commissions, and the current minister of immigration is Sean Fraser (IRCC, 2022e). The immigration department includes operational management and coordination, case management, foreign credentials referral branches, health management as well as international region which is responsible for the decision making of overseas visa offices, with each branch administered by a director general (Satzewich, 2015 pp. 82). IRCC has liaised with a private organization, VFS global group, who provides over 2000 visa application centres and operates in 110 countries, to help process visa applications. (Satzewich, 2015).

Visa application centres

Visa application centers (VACs) are private companies that have formal contracts with the Government of Canada, which serve as official locations to give your biometrics and help send your passport to visa offices. They are located across the world and speak the local language of each country they are located (IRCC, 2022d). In Nigeria, VFS global is the organization authorized by the Canadian government to provide administrative support services to visa applicants in

Nigeria. There are two visa application centres in Nigeria, one in Lagos and one in Abuja (VFS Global, 2023).

Visa officer

Visa officers work with IRCC and are responsible for assessing visa applications and determining students' true purpose and intentions for coming to Canada, in order to approve or refuse a visa application (Satzewich, 2015). They are responsible for checking applicants' past migration history and that of their family members who might have previously applied to Canada, and also detecting fraud and misrepresentation in an application (Satzewich, 2015). Visa officers enter notes regarding an applicant's file and the decisions made on their applications on the GCMS (Global Case Management System) which is used by the IRCC to store information on visa applications (Satzewich, 2015 pp.80).

Education agents

Education agents are third party business people that help prospective students enroll in education programs outside their home country and help institutions with student recruitment (Niegel, 2019). They provide support and advice to prospective students on course options and admission requirements, help students with their visa application process, and have an important role in recruiting international students into institutions in Canada (CMEC, 2013). They are sometimes paid by the institutions, but most times are paid by the students or by both (CMEC, 2013; Niegel, 2019).

Education agents are widely used by institutions to increase their international students' enrolment and maintain provincial and federal recruitment goals (Indus Community Services, 2021). Niegel (2019) highlighted that there are limited published studies on the role of educational

agents in student recruitment in Canada and the lack of agent regulations leaves students and their families vulnerable to misinformation and misalignment of interests.

Immigration lawyers/consultants

Immigration lawyers are different from Immigration consultants, although they are very similar and share similar roles in representing visa applicants, the major difference is their educational qualification (Major, 2020). Immigration lawyers have a legal education, and are legally registered lawyers who have undergone an internship period in a law firm, attended a law school, and passed the bar exam (Major, 2020). This gives them more experience than immigration consultants. They are able to advocate for clients in a Canadian court of law for judicial review and help applicants appeal a refused visa by highlighting errors in a visa officer's review procedure (Satzewich, 2015; Major, 2020).

In contrast, immigration consultants are certified immigration professionals registered and licensed as either a Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultant (RCIC) or a Regulated International Students Immigration advisor (RISIA), and require a CICC number to represent a client. Immigration lawyers are regulated by provincial laws, while Immigration consultants are regulated by the College of Immigration Citizenship (CICC) and supervised by the Immigration of Consultants of Canada Regulatory Council (ICCRC) (Major, 2020).

APPENDIX II: Interview Guide

Demographic Characteristics

1. What is your marital status?
2. What is the highest level of education you completed prior to your arrival to Canada?
3. Where did you obtain your previous degree(s)?
4. What degree are you pursuing at the University of Manitoba?
5. When did you arrive in Canada? Month/Year

Interview Questions

6. Can you walk me through the process of how you made the decision to pursue graduate studies in Canada?

Follow-up questions:

- “Why did you decide to pursue graduate studies?”
 - “What factors made you choose Canada over other countries like the US or UK?”
 - “What other countries did you apply to or consider applying to? Why didn’t you go to those countries?”
7. Can you share your experiences in obtaining a study permit experience in Canada, what the process was like for you, from the moment when you prepared to apply for a study permit until you arrived in Winnipeg?

Follow -up questions:

- “Please tell me about the documents you required to apply for the visa?”
- “How laborious was the process?”
- “Please explain any external factors that you had to consider – like family members, or having to travel to apply, or any community resistance you encountered?”
- “Did your faculty or department at the University of Manitoba assist you with attaining your student visa?”
- “If you had to apply for a study permit more than once before being successful, what would you say the difference was between your unsuccessful and successful application?”
- “Did you hire a lawyer or immigration consultant to assist you with the procedures? What was that process like?”
- “How helpful was the University of Manitoba in assisting you to navigate this process?”

8. Do you think your experience was negatively affected by covid and pandemic protocols or is the process the same outside of the pandemic?

9. Are you aware of the student visa application process for students from other countries? How does this process differ from your experience?

10. Prior to applying for your study permit, what communal knowledge was shared with you about the process, and in what ways did that help you or hinder you?

11. What is your overall impression of the Canadian study permit application process?

12. What are your intentions after you graduate from the University of Manitoba?

Follow up questions:

- “Do you want to stay in Canada?”
- “Do you want to move back to Nigeria? Or somewhere else?”
- “Can you explain your thinking around this?”
- “For Master’s students: Do you intend to apply for a PhD program or other post-secondary training? (In Canada, Nigeria or elsewhere?)”

13. Based on your experience, if you were giving advice to a Nigerian student who was planning to study in Canada, what would be the most important recommendations you would make to them about applying for a study permit?

- Follow up question: “What are the major difficulties you would hope to ameliorate with this advice?”

14. What advice would you give to the federal government/IRCC about addressing the challenges you faced?

15. What advice would you give provincial and municipal governments on how to help international students settle and consider staying in Winnipeg upon graduation?

16. What advice would you give to universities/post-secondary institutions about helping graduate students arrive in Canada (and addressing their immediate resettlement and financial needs)?

17. Were you aware that international students who have visas must declare they are interested in obtaining a permit that will allow them to work for up to 20 hours per week while they are a student in Canada?

- Follow up questions:
- “If yes, what did you know about this program?”
- “If no, have you tried to obtain a permit for part time work since you arrived in Canada?”
- “Are there problems or barriers to international students who wish to work while they study in Canada?”

18. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experience getting a study permit which has not already been discussed?

APPENDIX III: Ethics Approval Letter



University
of Manitoba

Research Ethics and Compliance

Human Ethics - Fort Garry
208-194 Dafoe Road
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
T: 204 474 8872
humanethics@umanitoba.ca

PROTOCOL APPROVAL

Effective: September 26, 2022

Expiry: September 25, 2023

Principal Investigator: Olusewa Olanubi

Advisor: Jason Edgerton

Protocol Number: HE2022-0239

Protocol Title: *International Education: A study of the Canadian student visa application experience of Nigerian international graduate students' in Canada.*

Jonathan Marotta, Chair, REB1

Research Ethics Board 1 has reviewed and approved the above research. The Human Ethics Office (HEO) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans- TCPS 2 (2018)*.

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

- i. Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the protocol only.
- ii. Any changes to the protocol or research materials must be approved by the HEO before implementation.
- iii. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be reported to the HEO immediately through an REB Event.
- iv. This approval is valid for one year only. A Renewal Request must be submitted and approved prior to the above expiry date.
- v. A Protocol Closure must be submitted to the HEO when the research is complete or if the research is terminated.
- vi. The University of Manitoba may request to audit your research documentation to confirm compliance with this approved protocol, and with the UM *Ethics of Research Involving Humans* [Ethics of Research Involving Humans](#) policies and procedures.

APPENDIX IV: Informed Consent Form



Informed Consent Form

Research Project Title: A study of the student visa application experiences of Nigerian international graduate students in Canada.

Principal Investigator: Olusewa Olanubi (Master's Student)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Jason Edgerton, Professor, University of Manitoba.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of the research:

I am a graduate student from Nigeria, enrolled in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Manitoba.

The purpose of this study is to explore and investigate the experiences of Nigerian graduate international students, during the process of applying for a student visa to study in Canada. It is hoped that this study will help create awareness of the issues graduate students from Nigeria experience when applying for a Canadian student visa. The research would unveil student's reasons for pursuing graduate school in Canada, their visa application experience, their future plans and recommendations for future students, Canadian institutions and the federal and provincial government.

Should you consent to participate, I will ask you questions about your experience while applying for your student visa, including your overall impression of the Canadian student visa application process, and your advice and suggestions for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), post-secondary institutions and provincial governments, regarding immigration policies affecting international students.

To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used throughout the data analysis and reporting of results, and any identifying information will be excluded or changed in the reporting of the results. For example, a real name of 'Paul' would be changed to 'Frank' when assigning pseudonyms. If you choose to waive your anonymity, you would have your real names used in the study.

Nature and duration of participation:

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation is voluntary and will involve one semi-structured interview. It will either be conducted in-person at the University of Manitoba or online using the University of Manitoba licensed Zoom (UM Zoom), depending on your availability and convenience, and may require 1-1.5 hours of your time.

The in-person interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder, while the interview conducted online will be audio and video recorded on UM Zoom. Zoom captures the audio and video recordings as a separate file, and the video file will be destroyed immediately. The interview recordings will be transcribed manually (without using any software application) by the principal investigator (Olusewa Olanubi).

It is important to note that the principal investigator (Olusewa Olanubi) plays a dual role as a visa student from Nigeria and researcher. The researcher's dual role will also be stated at the beginning of the interview, to ensure transparency. I will ensure that I do not impose my viewpoints and opinions on participants during data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Participation in this project is voluntary, if you feel uncomfortable with a question, you may decline to answer that question or you can skip that question and choose to remain in the interview or completely withdraw from the interview, and may choose whether the information obtained at that point can or cannot be used in the research.

Participants will not receive monetary compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

Any information gathered in this research will be kept strictly confidential, but due to the fact that the Nigerian international graduate student population at the University of Manitoba is fairly small, there is a slight risk that you might be identifiable from your responses in the research work.

In order to protect your confidentiality, all interview recordings will be transcribed by myself and the transcribed data will be identified only by code number and securely stored on the University of Manitoba OneDrive, in a password protected computer, which would only be accessible to myself and my thesis supervisor (Dr. Jason Edgerton). All hard copies of the data (i.e., transcribed interviews) will be stored securely in my thesis supervisor's office in a lock protected file cabinet within the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba.

Your name and all identifying features will be kept confidential and will not appear in any written or verbal report, document or presentation that could result from the study. Other information containing personal identifiers (e.g., consent forms, audio/video files) will be destroyed as soon as it is no longer necessary for scientific purposes (i.e., approximately May 2023). Electronic and hard copies of interview transcripts will also be deleted and/or shredded after the completion of the project (i.e., approximately August 2023).

It is important to note that your participation in this research will not affect your student visa status.

Risks and Benefits:

There is a minimal risk participating in this study. There is the possibility that you may experience some form of emotional upset or distress when asked to reflect on your experience applying for a study permit, due to some form of stressful or traumatic experiences. In such a situation, you could contact the Student Counselling Centre (SCC) which provides free mental health support to University of Manitoba students. Contact Information: (204) 474-8592 Monday to Friday 8:30am-4:30pm.

474 UMSU University Centre, 65 Chancellors Circle, University of Manitoba (Fort Garry Campus) Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2 Canada.

It is important to know that you do not have to answer any question that you do not want to, and you can stop the interview at any time. Participation in this research will not affect your visa or student status.

In terms of benefits, research findings would help create awareness on the concerns of graduate students about the process of obtaining a study permit to study in Canada, and also identify possible areas for improvement which could eventually improve the student visa application process for students from Nigeria. Also, you might find it empowering to share your view and experiences on this topic.

Dissemination:

This research is in partial fulfilment of the requirement for Masters of Arts degree in Sociology. The completed research will be uploaded on MSpace, which is an open access software for the scholarly works of faculty and students of the University of Manitoba.

Also, the information obtained in this research may appear in academic journals and other research publications (or conference presentations). Again, your personal confidentiality will be maintained throughout.

Feedback to Participants:

You have the opportunity to review the written transcript (in word document) of your interview and choose to omit any information that you want to be excluded from the research, before it is included in the data analysis. Such information will be immediately removed. The written transcript would be sent using my University of Manitoba provided email, and you will have up to three weeks from when the transcript is sent to respond, and state what you like to be removed. If your response is not received within that time frame, the principal investigator would notify you that the written transcript is being included in the research.

After the completion of the research, a brief (1-2 pages) summary of the research findings or results will be provided by email to all interested participants by September 2023.

Withdrawal from the study:

It is important to know that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time during the study, except after the project has been defended (approximately, August 2023). If you want to withdraw from the study during the interview, you should notify the Principal Investigator (Olusewa Olanubi) and the interview would be immediately ended, and all information generated completely erased. If you would like to withdraw from the study after the interview has been completed, you should inform the principal investigator via email (Olanubis@myumanitoba.ca), and every

information generated from you will be immediately deleted, and would not be used in the study in any form.

Consenting to participation:

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry Campus. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 204-474-7122 or HumanEthics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep for your records and reference.

If you agree to each of the following, please tick the corresponding box. If you do not agree, please leave the box blank:

I have **read or had read to me** the details of this consent form. []

I, _____ (print name) **agree to participate** in this study. Online [] In-person []

I agree to have the interview **video-recorded** if conducted online on zoom. []

I agree to have the interview **audio-recorded** if conducted in-person. []

I agree to have the findings (which may include quotations) from this project **published or presented** in a manner that does not reveal my identity. []

How would you like to be **quoted** in the research? Real name/Identity [] a pseudonym []

Would you like to **review a written transcript** of your interview before it is included in the data analysis? Yes [] No []

Do you wish to receive a **summary of the findings**? [] Yes [] No

Email Address: _____

A copy of this consent form has been given to me to keep for my records and reference.

Participant's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher and or Delegate's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix V: UNIMISA Letter



UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA NIGERIAN STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION
(UMNISA)

July 21st, 2022

To Whom It May Concern,

PROOF OF APPROVAL

This letter serves as a proof of approval for Olusewa Olanubi, to recruit participants within the University of Manitoba Nigerian Students' Association and conduct research on the topic **“A study of the student visa application experiences of Nigerian international graduate students in Canada”**.

For further questions or comments regarding this approval letter, kindly refer to the contact information provided below.

Sincerely,

Chimdinma Chijioke, (She/her)
President,
University of Manitoba Nigerian Students' Association



STUDY PARTICIPANTS NEEDED:

A study of the Canadian student visa application experience of Nigerian international graduate students in Canada

- ✓ Are you a Nigerian international graduate student (Masters/PhD) studying at the University of Manitoba?
- ✓ Did you apply for your student visa from Nigeria with a Nigerian passport?

Olusewa Olanubi, a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Manitoba, is conducting interviews with Nigerian international graduate students at the University of Manitoba.

Project details

-This project seeks to explore the experiences of Nigerian international graduate students while obtaining a Canadian student visa. It will unveil the impact of student visa policies on international education in Canada and create awareness on the challenges and concerns of graduate students applying for a Canadian student visa from a developing country.

-Interviews will take about 1 to 1.5 hours of participant's time. Due to Covid-19 protocols and based on participant's convenience and availability, interviews will be conducted either online using the University of Manitoba licensed Zoom or in-person at the University of Manitoba. The interview will be audio-recorded if conducted in-person, and will be video-recorded on Zoom if conducted online. Participants' privacy and confidentiality will be maintained all through, and will be required to sign a consent form in order to participate in this research.

-The interview will involve participants sharing their student visa application experience, providing recommendations for future Nigerian students who will apply for a Canadian student visa, and possible suggestions for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Canada (IRCC), postsecondary institutions and provincial governments to help graduate students arrive in Canada.

If you are interested and eligible to participate, kindly contact Olusewa Olanubi.

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry Campus.

If you have any question or concern, please feel free to contact myself (Olusewa Olanubi) or my Advisor, Dr. Jason Edgerton.