

BRAIN GAIN: LEVERAGING DEPORTATIONS FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated how Nigeria can transform the forced return of its skilled immigrants into an opportunity for national development. Using a basic qualitative design, the research collected data through semi-structured interviews and qualitative questionnaires from a purposive sample of 10 deported Nigerian immigrants who returned from the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy. The analysis revealed several key themes: inadequate policy support, social stigma and skill mismatch, potential for brain gain, and bureaucratic hurdles. The findings suggest that while deported immigrants encounter significant reintegration challenges, there is considerable potential for these returnees to drive economic growth if they are provided with proper support. The study highlights the need for comprehensive reintegration programs that combine vocational training, financial assistance, and social services, as well as the importance of improved policy frameworks and community support. Based on these insights, recommendations were proposed, including pre-departure and job-specific training, establishing a centralized support hotline, and regulatory measures to protect migrant workers. These recommendations offer a strategic framework for converting the challenges of deportation into opportunities for brain gain and sustainable economic growth in Nigeria. Future research should explore these dynamics further, mainly through longitudinal studies, to better understand the long-term impacts of reintegration strategies.

Keywords

Deportation, Reintegration, Brain Gain, Economic Growth, Return Migration

Introduction

Immigration control removes unauthorized individuals who have entered a country (Gibney & Hansen, 2003). Deportation, as a tool of immigration control, involves the forcible expulsion of an individual from the national territory, requiring the state to employ its full authority. Forced return is defined as a migratory movement that, regardless of its driving factors, involves force, compulsion, or coercion (Sironi et al., 2019). In the fiscal year 2023, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) documented 142,580 removals (ICE, 2023), marking a 97.5% increase over the fiscal year 2022. This substantial rise is attributed to shifts in migration patterns and modifications in U.S. immigration policies, such as lifting Title 42. Such processes permanently sever the state's responsibilities and bonds with the individual severance that capital punishment only surpasses in finality. Moreover, by physically removing individuals against their will, deportation disrupts the social, personal, and professional ties they have built over time (Gibney & Hansen, 2003).

Recent years have witnessed a marked intensification of immigration enforcement policies in the United States, Germany, and other Western nations, leading to the deportation of many Nigerian immigrants (Appleby, 2024). Traditionally, these deportations have been perceived solely as a loss of valuable human capital, not only for the individuals involved but also for the nations that invested in their skills and education (Arenas-Arroyo & Schmidpeter, 2022; Diodato et al., 2023). While scholars have extensively explored brain drain issues and the challenges that returning migrants face, most focus has been on voluntary repatriation or diaspora investment initiatives. However, this broader body of literature provides a backdrop against which the dynamics of forced repatriation can be reconsidered within the ongoing global debates on migration, national development, and the reconfiguration of human capital.

In the specific context of Nigeria, the recent wave of deportations offers a paradoxical opportunity to harness the skills and experiences of these individuals—a process referred to as brain gain. Although brain drains are often seen as detrimental, migration can sometimes lead to hidden benefits, ultimately fostering brain gain for the home country. The concept of brain gain posits that intellectual and technical elites from developing countries who have emigrated to industrialized nations can serve as a valuable resource for the socioeconomic development of their home countries (Hunger, 2002). In other words, every instance of brain drain holds the potential for brain gain (Hunger, 2002). More broadly, brain gain refers to the phenomenon whereby skilled and educated individuals return from developed countries to their home countries, contributing their expertise to foster national growth and development (Stark et al., 1997).

Despite the valuable expertise acquired abroad, deported Nigerian immigrants now face formidable challenges as they attempt to reintegrate into a local labor market fraught with bureaucratic inefficiencies and pervasive social stigmas (Hagan et al., 2019). The literature indicates that while brain drain has traditionally been viewed as detrimental, effective policy frameworks and targeted reintegration strategies can convert these forced returns into developmental assets (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). This study, therefore, seeks to explore how Nigeria can strategically leverage deportations to foster brain gain and drive sustainable economic growth. In doing so, it aims to bridge the gap in existing research by providing a focused analysis of deported Nigerians' reintegration experiences and formulating actionable policy recommendations that address their unique challenges.

Statement of the Problem

Recent deportations of Nigerian immigrants from Western nations such as the United States and Germany have resulted in the forced return of some highly skilled individuals who developed valuable expertise abroad. Almost 400,000 migrants in the United States face deportation each year—a staggering eightfold increase since the 1980s—raising the potential for these returns to serve as catalysts for brain gain and transformative socioeconomic growth (Hagan et al., 2019). In fiscal year 2016 alone, 598 Nigerian immigrants were removed from the United States and deported back to Nigeria for various reasons (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2016). Additionally, Italy and Germany have intensified their efforts to expedite the deportation of undocumented Nigerian migrants (Bagnoli & Civilini, 2017). Over the last decade, thousands of Nigerians have been forcefully ejected from their destinations and returned to Nigeria with little support (Nwanna & Olowu, 2019). Since 2007, a total of 1,394 Nigerians subject to expulsion orders from several European countries have been deported through Rome to Lagos (Bagnoli & Civilini, 2017).

Although these deportations are often viewed as a loss for host countries, they present a significant opportunity for Nigeria to harness returning talent for national development. The problem is that Nigeria is missing a crucial opportunity to convert the forced return of its skilled immigrants—potentially a valuable source of human capital—into tangible economic benefits. Despite the potential for these returnees to drive innovation, productivity, and overall national economic growth (i.e., brain gain), the country faces significant challenges such as inefficient policy frameworks, bureaucratic obstacles, and pervasive social stigmas. These challenges hinder the effective utilization of returning talent, resulting in lost opportunities for sustainable economic development. Most deportation research in Nigeria has concentrated on human trafficking and the negative impact of deportation on migrants' chances of integrating into their home country. This research primarily examines cases involving female sex workers, such as young Nigerian women deported from Italy (Plambech, 2014; Plambech, 2017a; Plambech, 2017b; Ratia & Notermans, 2012). In contrast, there has been little to no focus on exploring the reintegration of individuals in post-deportation scenarios. This study seeks to explore how Nigeria can effectively capitalize on the forced return of these skilled immigrants, transforming a potential setback into a strategic opportunity for brain gain and sustainable economic growth.

Participants for Study

In this study, we focus on deported Nigerian immigrants—those who have been forcibly returned to Nigeria from Western countries such as the United States, Germany, and others. These individuals are key to our research because their personal experiences with reintegration—encompassing challenges like adapting to local conditions, navigating bureaucratic hurdles, and overcoming social stigmas—can help us understand how Nigeria might turn these forced returns into opportunities for growth and development. According to Bekele and Ago (2022), a growing body of support suggests that recruiting 10 to 20 key research participants is sufficient to uncover and understand the significant issues in any study. We selected a purposive sample of 10 participants who meet the following criteria: they must have been deported from a Western country, have resided there for at least one year to acquire valuable skills and expertise, and be willing to share their experiences. Efforts will be made to ensure diversity in age, gender, professional background, and regional representation to capture various perspectives.

Data will be collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. This method allows participants to share detailed personal stories while allowing the researcher to probe deeper into important

themes (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Strict ethical guidelines will be followed throughout the study. All participants will be fully informed about the study's purpose, and their privacy will be protected. Informed consent will be obtained from each participant, who will have the right to withdraw from the study without any consequences (Gordon & Prohaska, 2006).

Overarching Research Question:

- How can Nigeria effectively leverage the deportation of skilled Nigerian immigrants from the United States, Germany, and other Western nations to promote brain gain and drive sustainable economic growth?

Sub-Questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of deported Nigerian immigrants, and what challenges do they encounter during reintegration into Nigeria's socioeconomic landscape?
2. How do existing policy frameworks, bureaucratic processes, and social attitudes in Nigeria facilitate or hinder the reintegration and optimal utilization of these skilled individuals?
3. What strategic measures and policy recommendations can be developed to transform the deportation process into an opportunity for brain gain and sustainable economic development in Nigeria?

Purpose Statement

This qualitative study aims to examine how Nigeria can strategically harness the forced return of its skilled immigrants from the United States, Germany, and other Western nations to transform a potential setback into an opportunity for brain gain and sustainable economic growth. This investigation will explore the lived experiences of deportees, assess the reintegration challenges they face—including inefficient policy frameworks, bureaucratic obstacles, and pervasive social stigmas—and critically evaluate the existing social dynamics that affect their reentry into Nigerian society. The aim is to develop actionable recommendations that will enable policymakers to convert the forced return of human capital into tangible economic benefits, thereby fostering innovation, productivity, and long-term socioeconomic development in Nigeria.

Significance of Study

This study holds significant benefits for a diverse range of stakeholders by addressing a critical gap in understanding how forced repatriation can be transformed into an asset for national development. For policymakers and government agencies in Nigeria, the findings will provide evidence-based insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with reintegrating deported skilled immigrants, thereby informing more effective and humane immigration and labor policies. The academic community, particularly researchers in migration studies, economics, and public policy, will benefit from a nuanced exploration of brain gain as a counterbalance to traditional narratives of brain drain. Additionally, the study's recommendations can serve as a strategic framework for community leaders, economic development practitioners, and organizations supporting reintegration efforts, ultimately contributing to sustainable economic growth and enhanced societal well-being.

Theoretical Framework

Human Capital Theory (HCT), as articulated by Becker (1964), provides a robust framework for understanding how investments in education, skills, and training yield significant returns in increased productivity and economic growth. The HCT posits that formal education, like the training provided by higher institutions, helps people become more productive (van der Merwe, 2010). HCT is pivotal in promoting education as an investment that benefits individuals—through higher earnings—and nations—through enhanced economic performance (Gillies, 2015). The HCT in economics underscores the importance of maximizing labor productivity by accumulating employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities. McConnell et al. (2009) argue that a well-educated and better-trained individual can deliver a substantially more significant amount of productive effort than someone with less education and training (p. 85).

Moreover, Becker (1964) posits that human capital can be developed through diverse avenues such as education, training, and migration. In essence, HCT enhances firm performance and demonstrates how organizations can invest in their workforce to boost overall capacity and effectiveness. This theory is particularly relevant to the current study because it frames the reintegration of deported Nigerian immigrants, who have acquired valuable expertise abroad, as an opportunity to strengthen Nigeria's human capital and drive national development. Numerous studies have empirically supported the positive relationship between human capital development and economic performance (Osiobe, 2019). For instance, countries prioritizing education and skill development typically experience higher economic growth rates due to a more capable and innovative workforce (Hanushek, 2020; Mussaiyib & Pradhan, 2024). By effectively leveraging the investments made in these

individuals through their education and work experiences abroad, Nigeria can transform forced repatriation into a catalyst for national development, improved productivity, and sustainable economic growth.

Research Method

This study employs a basic qualitative research design to investigate how Nigeria can leverage the forced return of its skilled immigrants for brain gain and sustainable economic growth. Guided by Creswell's (2013) framework for qualitative research design and informed by Merriam's (2009) approaches to qualitative inquiry, the study uses semi-structured interviews and questionnaires as its primary data collection methods. This design enables an exploration of the lived experiences of deported Nigerian immigrants, the challenges they face during reintegration, and policymakers' perceptions regarding current institutional frameworks. Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes, yielding rich, contextualized insights into the potential for transforming deportations into developmental opportunities. Appropriate checklists and protocols for ensuring data credibility and trustworthiness, including member checking and triangulation, will enhance the study's rigor.

Member checking involved sharing interview transcripts, preliminary findings, or interpretations with the study participants to confirm that these accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. This process ensured that the data and its analysis accurately represented the participants' views. By allowing participants to review and provide feedback on the data, the researchers identified any inaccuracies, misinterpretations, or gaps, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2013). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted, member checking was essential in establishing credibility in qualitative research. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources and methods to cross-verify the research findings. This study's triangulation entailed comparing information obtained from semi-structured interviews and qualitative questionnaires to identify consistent themes and patterns.

This process reduced the likelihood of bias and enhanced the study's overall validity by ensuring that the conclusions drawn were supported by converging evidence from different sources (Merriam, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also recognized triangulation as a robust strategy for improving the reliability and credibility of qualitative research findings. Given the topic's sensitivity and the participant group's vulnerability, strict ethical considerations will be maintained. All participants will be fully informed about the study's purpose, and informed consent will be obtained before data collection begins. Confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured throughout the research process, with personal identifiers removed from transcripts and reports to protect participants' privacy. These measures align with ethical guidelines for research with human subjects and are critical to building trust and safeguarding the well-being of all participants involved in the study.

Definition of Key Terms

Human Capital

Human capital refers to the economic value of an individual's skills, knowledge, and experience, which can be enhanced through education and training (Becker, 1964). This study specifically pertains to the expertise acquired by Nigerian immigrants while abroad.

Brain Gain

Brain gain describes the process by which a country benefits from the return or acquisition of skilled individuals, thereby augmenting its human capital and driving economic development (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Reintegration

Reintegration is the process through which deported individuals are absorbed back into the social, economic, and cultural fabric of their home country, facing challenges such as adapting to local market conditions and overcoming bureaucratic and social obstacles (Ekanayake, 2024).

Delimitations

This study is delimited to deported Nigerian immigrants who have been forced to return from the United States, Germany, and other Western nations over the past five years. The research focuses exclusively on their reintegration experiences and the associated policy frameworks in Nigeria. As a result, other aspects of migration—such as voluntary return migration or the experiences of immigrants in other host countries—are beyond the scope of this study (Creswell, 2013).

Limitations of the Study

Due to the scope and resources available for this research project, the study relies on a convenience sample of deported Nigerian immigrants and selected policymakers, which may not fully represent the entire population of interest (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, time constraints may limit the depth of follow-up interviews and the extent to which longitudinal reintegration processes can be observed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While these limitations are acknowledged, the study employs rigorous qualitative methods to mitigate their impact and ensure credible, insightful findings.

This section has outlined the qualitative research design employed to investigate how Nigeria can transform deportations into opportunities for brain gain and economic growth. By utilizing semi-structured interviews, qualitative questionnaires, and thematic analysis, the study seeks to generate a nuanced understanding of the reintegration challenges faced by deported Nigerian immigrants and the policy implications thereof. The next sections look at the literature review, present the findings derived from the collected data, and provide a comprehensive discussion of the emerging themes.

Literature Review

The increasing enforcement of immigration policies in Western nations has led to a rise in the deportation of Nigerian immigrants, prompting renewed scholarly attention on the phenomena of brain drain and, more recently, brain gain. Traditionally, deportations have been viewed through the lens of brain drain, which is a loss of valuable human capital for both host and source countries (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; El Saghir et al., 2020; Oberman, 2013). However, emerging perspectives suggest that the forced return of skilled individuals may offer source countries like Nigeria a unique opportunity to harness the expertise and experience gained abroad, thereby facilitating economic development. This literature review examines the global and Nigerian contexts of deportations, explores relevant theoretical frameworks, and identifies both empirical findings and policy challenges related to the reintegration of deported individuals.

Brain Gain

The “brain gain” phenomenon has emerged as a counterpoint to the well-known phenomenon of brain drain, where skilled professionals emigrate in search of better opportunities. While Brain Drain refers to the phenomenon where educated or skilled individuals leave one region, industry, or field to move elsewhere—typically in search of higher pay or improved living conditions (Docquier & Rapoport, 2008), Brain gain, in contrast, refers to the return of these skilled individuals to their home country or the attraction of foreign talent, resulting in an influx of expertise that can stimulate economic development (El-Mallakh & Wahba, 2016). The theoretical foundations of brain gain are rooted in HCT, which emphasizes that investments in education, skills, and knowledge drive productivity and growth (Orcan et al., 2005). Scholars argue that when skilled workers return, they bring with them not only technical skills but also new ideas, managerial expertise, and international networks that can transform local industries.

Over time, the evolution of brain gain has been influenced by globalization, improved communication technologies, and policy shifts that encourage repatriation (Gupta et al, 2024). Early studies focused on the loss experienced by developing economies, but more recent research highlights the potential for brain gain to create a virtuous cycle of innovation and entrepreneurship (Mishchuk et al., 2024). Return migration from developed to developing countries can yield many benefits, including enhanced skills, greater expertise, and expanded networks (Bandiera et al., 2021; Wahba, 2021). For instance, repatriated professionals can establish start-ups, manage multinational collaborations, and help create an enabling environment where knowledge transfer is prioritized. According to Wahba (2021), return migration can offer significant benefits by enabling migrants who have saved money abroad to overcome credit constraints at home and establish their own businesses.

In the Nigerian context, brain gain may involve leveraging deportations by creating mechanisms that convert forced returns into opportunities for economic reintegration. As nations reconsider migration policies and talent management strategies, the evolving discourse on brain gain emphasizes both the benefits and challenges inherent in reabsorbing skilled labor. Researchers continue to debate the conditions under which brain gain is most effective, examining factors such as government incentives, infrastructure quality, and the prevailing business climate. Although return migration is influenced by social, personal, economic, and policy factors, research indicates that social and personal motivations are the primary drivers for individuals deciding to return to Sub-Saharan Africa, outweighing policy and economic concerns (Weldemariam et al., 2023).

Migration and Deportation in Nigeria

Migration is often seen as a response to overwhelming challenges, where individuals attempt to balance personal aspirations with societal expectations and the constraints of the world around them (Lucht, 2011). Resistance to accommodating migrants’ needs has contributed to the increasing trend of deportations in migration governance.

Nigeria represents a context where multiple factors drive migration. Despite its rich natural resources, the country has struggled with economic instability, poor governance, and high unemployment, pushing many young Nigerians to seek opportunities abroad as a means of escaping hardship (Obi-Ani et al., 2020).

Beyond economic reasons, migration is also fueled by persecution, violence, and ecological disasters, as many flee insecurity caused by Boko Haram, the Niger Delta crisis, and discrimination against marginalized communities (Adepoju, 2000). Internal displacement often places additional pressure on host communities, increasing tensions over scarce resources. The longer displacement persists, the more individuals consider migration as an alternative, even if it involves taking irregular and high-risk routes. Unfortunately, one of the greatest risks of irregular migration is deportation, which disrupts migrants' lives and creates significant reintegration challenges (Dako-Gyeke & Kodom, 2017).

Research on deportation in Nigeria has predominantly focused on human trafficking and the reintegration of deported sex workers (Plambech, 2014; 2017a; 2017b; Ratia & Notermans, 2012). However, little attention has been given to the broader reintegration challenges faced by deportees, including those who migrated for economic or political reasons.

Historical Context of Migration and Deportation in Nigeria

Deportation, defined as the forced removal of individuals due to administrative or legal actions, has historically been linked to state policies on population control and national security (Rosenblum, 2015; Dako-Gyeke & Kodom, 2017). Nigeria has experienced waves of deportation dating back to the 1980s economic downturn, following the oil boom collapse. The rapid decline in oil prices led to severe financial hardship, increased external debt, and economic instability (Godwin & Dagogo, 2011).

Before this period, Nigeria was a net immigration country, attracting labor from neighboring African nations. However, with rising unemployment and economic uncertainty, the country transitioned to a net emigration state (De Haas, 2006; Edeh, 2021). This shift intensified in 1986, marking the beginning of mass migration as Nigerians sought better economic opportunities in Europe and other industrialized regions (Agbu, 2008).

Initially, many Nigerians moved to Italy, where there was a demand for low-skilled labor in agriculture and service industries (Plambech, 2017a). However, stricter immigration policies in Europe, Africa, and the Gulf States have forced migrants to take riskier journeys. These routes often involve traveling overland through the Sahara Desert, temporary stays in Libya, and dangerous Mediterranean crossings. Many who attempt these journeys face deportation if unsuccessful, returning to Nigeria under distressing circumstances.

While revoking legal residency is a common deportation mechanism, not all forced returns are classified as deportations. Individuals repatriated through the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are labeled as voluntary returnees (Edeh, 2021). However, the voluntariness of such returns remains highly contested, especially considering the severe hardships faced by migrants in transit countries like Libya. Regardless of whether individuals return voluntarily or through deportation, they often share similar reintegration struggles, facing social stigma, economic instability, and limited opportunities for rebuilding their lives (Edeh, 2021).

Empirical Evidence on Deportations and Repatriation

Empirical evidence on deportation and repatriation reveals a complex interplay between migration dynamics and reintegration challenges. For instance, the United States currently removes approximately 400,000 individual migrants annually—an almost eightfold increase since the mid-1990s (Hagan et al., 2015). In contrast, Nigeria reported a migration rate of -0.29 per 1,000 inhabitants in 2021, indicating that departures exceeded arrivals. Furthermore, an estimated 1.7 million Nigerians live abroad (UNDESA, 2020, p. 46). Despite this, many Nigerian citizens are deported annually from various countries, and these deportations often label returnees as “illegal” or “undeserving,” thereby hindering their access to reintegration support.

Return migration—a process defined by King (2000, p. 8) as the return of individuals to their country of origin after an extended period abroad—is influenced by a mix of social, personal, economic, and policy-related factors. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, social and personal motivations tend to outweigh economic or policy considerations when migrants decide to return (Weldemariam et al., 2023). Studies on deportation reveal that returning migrants frequently encounter significant obstacles, such as a mismatch between their acquired skills and local labor market needs, bureaucratic challenges, and pervasive social stigma (Stillman, 2018; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2016; Roza et al., 2020; Saavedra Solano et al., 2023). Comparative analyses further suggest that while some countries have established effective reintegration programs, others struggle with these issues (Mankiw et al., 1992).

Perceptions of return migration also differ between countries of origin and destination. In many home countries, including Nigeria, return migration is viewed as a low-priority issue, often overshadowed by the difficulties of forced return (Haase & Honerath, 2016). Conversely, many OECD countries focus on ensuring the safe and dignified return of migrants without legal grounds to remain (OECD, 2020). In Nigeria, insufficient policy

frameworks fail to support deported individuals fully, leaving valuable human capital underutilized and exposing returnees to additional risks, such as further deportation, arrest, or re-dispersal (Adebayo, 2023). Overall, these findings underscore the critical need for robust, integrated policies and reintegration programs that transform the challenges of deportation and repatriation into opportunities for sustainable development.

Reintegration Challenges and Opportunities

Return migration is far more than remittances; it carries significant developmental benefits by transferring human, financial, and social capital back home. Migrants return not only with savings but also with valuable networks and skills. Early development theories posited that return-migrants infuse new ideas and business skills into developing countries, helping to modernize them (de Haas, 2010). Even low-skilled migrants have the potential to become successful entrepreneurs—significantly when they acquire foreign language skills—which in turn can transform local communities (Hapipi, 2012; Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2017).

However, the reintegration process is complex. Many deported migrants return burdened by substantial debt incurred during their migration (Ambrosius, 2025; Carling & Hernandez Carretero, 2008, p. 410). Deportation carries a significant stigma, often more humiliating than other forms of marginal employment, as it lacks the prospects for upward social mobility (Plambech, 2017b, pp. 149–150). This stigma and unfamiliarity with local customs and resources, especially after extended periods abroad, can hinder efforts to secure employment or start new ventures (David, 2015).

In Nigeria, for instance, deportees are frequently viewed as having committed crimes, a perception that significantly affects their reintegration prospects. When these individuals face persistent challenges in adjusting to the local social and economic environment, they risk being labeled as an “unwanted surplus” and may even be driven back into re-emigration (Henke, 2005; Carling, 2006: 16). Despite these obstacles, return migration from developed to developing countries offers significant opportunities. It can infuse local labor markets with improved skills, innovative know-how, and expansive networks, thereby addressing critical gaps (Bahar et al., 2018).

Given these complexities, scholars argue that targeted policy interventions are essential. Effective reintegration strategies must address bureaucratic hurdles, provide robust support services, and mitigate social stigmas to ensure that the potential benefits of returning migrants are fully realized (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). In summary, while reintegration presents considerable challenges, it also offers the opportunity to unlock substantial socioeconomic benefits—if supported by comprehensive and well-coordinated policy frameworks.

Policy Frameworks and Intervention Strategies

Remote work can encourage return migration by allowing individuals to spend more time in their home country and reconsider their decision to return (Săniuță & Jianu, 2022). In addition, collaboration with business and academic sectors and establishing policies for diaspora research and exit interviews can further support this process (Săniuță & Jianu, 2022). Moreover, investing in initiatives that improve citizens’ well-being reduces migration and encourages expatriates to return, strengthening the national economy (Săniuță & Jianu, 2022).

Policy literature indicates that although some efforts have been made to support returning migrants, many initiatives remain fragmented and poorly coordinated. International examples reveal that comprehensive reintegration programs—which combine vocational training, financial support, and social services—can greatly improve the prospects of returnees (Beine, Docquier, & Rapoport, 2008). In Nigeria, however, current policy frameworks are limited and do not fully meet the varied needs of deported immigrants. This highlights an urgent need for an integrated policy approach that supports both the economic reintegration and the broader social and cultural reentry of these individuals into Nigerian society.

For instance, consider how three different countries attempt to bring their citizens back home. In Spain, the government developed a detailed plan known as the Policy Plan de Retorno a Espana. Extensive consultations through workshops and focus groups with emigrants helped design 50 specific measures, such as job support and psychological assistance, to encourage skilled workers to return (Săniuță & Jianu, 2022). In Poland, rather than one unified plan, the government has introduced several programs over the years—such as tax breaks, educational support, and practical guides—to make the country more welcoming for returnees collectively (Săniuță & Jianu, 2022). Conversely, despite significant emigration from Romania, there is no clear national strategy to facilitate return migration. Instead, smaller private projects and initiatives attempt to fill the gap, resulting in a fragmented approach (Guvernul României, 2017; The National Strategy for Romanians Everywhere, 2017–2020).

In summary, while countries like Spain and Poland have implemented coordinated measures to encourage return migration, others, such as Romania, rely on scattered efforts. This underscores the importance of migration stakeholders, especially governments, in developing effective reintegration programs that can manage both successful return migrants and those facing challenges, ultimately maximizing developmental impact (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2017). Moreover, key elements of an effective reintegration program, such as outreach and counselling, case management and referral, and strong partnerships, are essential for successful policy implementation (OECD, 2020).

Potential for Brain Gain and Economic Growth

Local development plans should incorporate migration dynamics, particularly the impact of return migration (Asis, 2011). Decisions about both emigration and return migration are influenced by carefully weighing costs and benefits at the individual or household level (Wahba, 2021). This decision-making process is deeply intertwined with a country's resilience, particularly its economic stability and robust supply chain—which can significantly attract highly educated workers and foreign entrepreneurs (Mishchuk et al., 2024). In such environments, these skilled migrants find more significant opportunities for professional growth and entrepreneurial success, which, in turn, enhances the overall resilience and competitiveness of the destination country. However, if returnees struggle to reintegrate or if their skills do not align with local needs, there is a risk of brain waste, undermining potential economic gains (Wahba, 2021). Scholars have further enriched this discussion by categorizing different types of return migration.

For example, King (1978:175; 1986:5) identified three main types based on the developmental differences between the countries involved migrations between similar societies with varying labor opportunities to the return flows from developed nations to less developed, often former colonial, territories. Additionally, Velizarova (2009:154) distinguished among several forms, including circular migration, the return of individuals to their ancestral homelands after generations, highly qualified individuals coming back, and retirees returning (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2017). As an alternative to brain drain, the concept of brain gain emphasizes that the successful reintegration of skilled individuals can lead to increased productivity, innovation, and improved global competitiveness (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). For countries like Nigeria, harnessing this potential means overcoming the challenges of reintegration and creating an environment that fully utilizes the expertise of returnees. With targeted policy support, institutional reforms, and social acceptance, nations can transform migration challenges into strategic advantages for national development.

Global Trends in Deportation and Talent Migration

Deportation is a high-risk migration management measure representing another form of involuntary return (Kleist & Bob-Milliar, 2013). Both deportation and detention have become normalized in many migration destination and transit countries, particularly in Europe and the United States. The EU's 2008 Return Directive and various readmission agreements for rejected migrants and asylum-seekers underscore the rising use of deportation as a migration management tool (Kleist & Bob-Milliar, 2013). Increasing trends in detention and deportation have troubled many families (Pinedo & Valdez, 2020). Global trends in deportation and talent migration have evolved substantially. Adamson (2006) notes that international migration has become a key priority on the global security agenda. As countries grapple with immigration policies and border security, deportation policies have become more stringent, often resulting in the forced return of skilled professionals (Coutin, 2014; Wallace & Young, 2018). Many deportees possess valuable expertise acquired abroad (Kleist & Bob-Milliar, 2013; Lebow et al., 2021).

Recent literature highlights that when deportation is paired with supportive reintegration programs, it can lead to brain gain (Săniuță & Jianu, 2022). Countries with robust reintegration policies enable smoother transitions, allowing deported talent to contribute positively to their domestic economies. However, a comprehensive overview of return migration policies remains elusive. In many countries of origin, policies toward returning migrants were underdeveloped or considered a secondary concern (Batistella, 2018). Focus has mainly been on formalizing remittances, promoting productive spending, and fostering entrepreneurship. Over time, the need for return migration policies emerged—to help migrants break the cycle of repeated migration and to harness their potential for national development (Batistella, 2018). Meanwhile, destination countries have developed schemes to reduce irregular migration, offering incentives and establishing agreements with countries of origin (Batistella, 2018; Jean-Pierre, 2014). International comparisons indicate that strong institutional frameworks and proactive diaspora engagement lead to better integration of deported professionals, offering valuable insights for countries like Nigeria.

Economic Impact of Repatriated Talent: Human Capital and Innovation

The economic impact of repatriated talent is a critical subject, especially when viewed through the lenses of human capital and innovation. Hagan and Wassink (2016) note that returning professionals often bring advanced skills, fresh perspectives, and exposure to international best practices that can spark innovation and drive economic growth. Wahba (2021) further emphasizes that the re-entry of skilled individuals can enhance productivity, promote entrepreneurial ventures, and bridge knowledge gaps within local industries. In Nigeria, this repatriated talent holds the potential to boost competitiveness in vital sectors such as technology, finance, and manufacturing (Alabi et al., 2025). The phenomenon of brain gain not only leads to the development of new products and services but also improves operational efficiencies and fosters innovative business networks (Wongsansukcharoen & Thaweepaiboonwong, 2023). Additionally, returning professionals are often more inclined to take calculated risks and invest in start-ups or collaborative ventures, which further accelerates economic dynamism.

For instance, Bao et al. (2022) indicate that rural migrant workers frequently return to initiate their own businesses, thereby promoting employment, alleviating poverty, and driving rural development. Empirical evidence suggests that regions benefiting from brain gain enjoy increased foreign direct investment and improved performance in high-tech sectors (Grossmann, 2021), while research by Vārpiņa et al. (2023) shows that return migrants are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities or pursue self-employment compared to non-migrants. Moreover, the innovative contributions of repatriated talent can influence public policy, prompting the adoption of progressive economic strategies (OECD, 2017). However, realizing these benefits demands robust support mechanisms, including access to finance, modern infrastructure, and conducive regulatory environments. Naudé et al. (2015) assert that policies fostering entrepreneurship and innovation are essential to maximize the economic impact of brain gain, transforming challenges into opportunities for sustainable growth.

Policy Frameworks and Reintegration Strategies in Nigeria

The Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program, established by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 1979, helps migrants return to their home countries. It provides travel support, financial assistance, and reintegration services to those who voluntarily return. The program is promoted as a dignified alternative to deportation (Fine & Walters, 2021). However, IOM's policies exclude deportees, as the organization is not involved in forced returns (Reintegration Handbook, 2019). Similarly, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), created in 2003, focuses on helping victims of human trafficking. It provides counseling, shelter, and vocational training for survivors. However, its reintegration efforts are limited to victims of trafficking, leaving other deported migrants without support (Idemudia et al., 2021).

Many stranded Nigerian immigrants have returned through AVRR, escaping trafficking, imprisonment, and abuse. The program includes pre-departure counseling, travel coordination, and post-arrival reintegration assistance (Edeh, 2021). Since 2005, IOM has also provided business training and financial grants for returnees. However, deportees remain excluded from these benefits. In Nigeria, the policy framework surrounding deportations and the reintegration of skilled professionals is critical for transforming potential brain drain into brain gain (Edeh, 2021). Existing literature reveals that effective reintegration strategies depend on comprehensive policies that address both economic and social dimensions (IOM, 2019).

Nigeria struggles to reintegrate deported migrants due to limited policies, bureaucratic delays, and lack of financial support. Scholars suggest that effective reintegration requires financial incentives, job opportunities, and recognition of foreign qualifications (Collyer, 2012; Salihi, 2020). Governments and diaspora organizations can play a role in helping deported talent reconnect with local industries. A comprehensive reintegration policy should include mentorship, networking, and social support. This approach can help reduce stigma and turn deportation into an opportunity for economic growth. By supporting returning migrants, Nigeria can benefit from brain gain and improve its economic competitiveness (Collyer, 2012; Salihi, 2020).

Identified Gaps and Research Justification

Return migration research in Nigeria remains underexplored, particularly regarding forced repatriation through deportation. While much of the literature has examined voluntary return migration and its economic impact, few studies have investigated how deportation can be leveraged as an opportunity for brain gain. Research on migration and reintegration often focuses on skilled migrants (Dustmann, Itzhak, & Weiss, 2011), arguing that return migration can counteract brain drain. However, most of these studies emphasize out-migration and poverty reduction (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2017) rather than the potential benefits of systematic reintegration for deported individuals.

Additionally, existing studies tend to focus on human trafficking victims, particularly Nigerian women deported from Europe, rather than on the broader population of deportees, including those forced to return from transit countries such as Libya (Plambech, 2014; Plambech, 2017a; Plambech, 2017b; Ratia & Notermans, 2012). There is also a lack of qualitative research capturing the lived experiences of deported Nigerians and the socio-political factors influencing their reintegration. Addressing these gaps, this study aims to examine how Nigeria can transform forced repatriation into an economic opportunity through structured reintegration policies.

Summary

This literature review has outlined the theoretical and empirical foundations of this study. By synthesizing insights from Human Capital Theory, Brain Drain and Brain Gain frameworks, and empirical research on deportation and reintegration, the review provides a strong rationale for exploring how Nigeria can turn forced return migration into an opportunity for national development. The lack of research on deportation-linked reintegration strategies highlights the need for a systematic approach that considers both economic reintegration and social reintegration policies. The identified gaps further justify the need for this study, which aims to provide actionable policy

recommendations for harnessing the potential of deported Nigerians. By addressing these challenges, Nigeria can shift from viewing deportation as a crisis to seeing it as a means of workforce reintegration and economic transformation.

Methods (Methodology)

Study Design:

For this study, we used a basic qualitative research design. We chose this approach to explore how Nigeria can turn the forced return of its skilled immigrants into an opportunity for national development. This design was ideal because it allowed us to gather in-depth insights from a small group of participants through methods like interviews. It helps us understand the personal experiences and challenges faced by these returnees in detail. We followed the guidelines that Creswell (2013) provided when selecting and describing our qualitative research design. These guidelines helped us ensure that our study is well-structured, rigorous, and capable of capturing the rich, nuanced data we needed for this research.

Participants:

For this study, we selected a purposive sample of 10 deported Nigerian immigrants who returned from the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy over the past five years. Specifically, our sample includes 4 participants from the USA, 3 from Germany, 2 from the UK, and 1 from Italy. We used purposive sampling because it allows us to intentionally choose individuals who have directly experienced forced return migration, ensuring that we gather in-depth and relevant insights. According to Merriam (2009), purposive sampling is especially valuable in qualitative research as it focuses on those with specific, meaningful experiences related to the research topic. This approach helps us capture the rich details necessary for understanding the complex challenges and opportunities faced by these returnees.

Data Collection Procedures:

For this study, we collected data using semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. We used an interview guide to ensure consistency across all interviews, and with the participants' consent, all sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In cases where participants could not join live interviews due to technological issues or other constraints, we also used qualitative questionnaires to gather their responses. This approach ensured that we captured insights from all participants. In preparing the methodological approach, we relied on the interview techniques and ethical guidelines outlined in Creswell (2013) and the American Psychological Association (2017).

Data Analysis Methods:

For data analysis, I used thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in the interview data. Using the excellent framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), I familiarized myself with the data through carefully reading the transcripts. Next, I generated initial codes to capture important data features. I then organized these codes into potential themes and reviewed them to ensure they accurately represented the data. Once the themes were refined and clearly defined, I produced a detailed narrative report of the findings. To support and streamline the analysis process, I used NVivo 12 software for organizing, coding, and managing the data.

Additionally, I incorporated member checking and peer debriefing throughout the process to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, following the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985). For ethical considerations in this study, we ensured that all participants provided informed consent, and that all data were fully anonymized to protect their confidentiality. Although formal Institutional Review Board approval was not required for this research, we conducted the study in full adherence to the ethical guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association (2017) and the Belmont Report (1979).

Results (Findings)

Data Presentation:

The findings are presented in a narrative form, using direct quotes from participants to illustrate the emergent themes. Although tables or figures were used to summarize the themes, the focus remains on providing rich, qualitative insights from the interviews. The data were carefully coded and grouped into themes that reflect the lived experiences of deported Nigerian immigrants. It is essential to clearly articulate emergent themes using illustrative quotes to add depth to our qualitative findings (Merriam, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that rich descriptions enhance the overall quality of qualitative data. Moreover, presenting findings through narrative accounts and direct quotes deepens the analysis and boosts the study's credibility (Creswell, 2013). Capturing the authentic voices of participants is, therefore, crucial to ensure that the research is both comprehensive and trustworthy.

Key Themes and Insights:**1. Inadequate Policy Support:**

Many participants expressed frustration with Nigeria's fragmented policy framework for reintegration. One participant noted:

"When I returned, I found that there was no clear support system for us. We were left to navigate the job market on our own." This sentiment is common among respondents and suggests that current policies do not adequately address the multifaceted needs of returnees.

2. Social Stigma and Skill Mismatch:

Several participants described challenges related to a mismatch between the skills they acquired abroad and local labor market demands and the social stigma they face upon return. For example, one respondent stated:

"I spent years perfecting my skills overseas, but here, my qualifications don't match what employers are looking for. It feels like all that hard work has gone to waste." This quote highlights the personal and economic obstacles that hinder effective reintegration.

3. Potential for Brain Gain:

Despite the challenges, many returnees are optimistic about the potential for their skills to contribute to Nigeria's economic development if proper support were in place. One participant remarked:

"If the government could set up a structured reintegration program, I truly believe that the skills we bring can boost innovation and drive economic growth." This optimism underscores the possibility of achieving brain gain with the right policy interventions and support structures.

4. Bureaucratic Hurdles and Implementation Challenges:

Some respondents mentioned difficulties with bureaucratic processes and the lack of coordination among support services. One participant commented: *"The red tape was overwhelming. It took months to even get basic documentation processed, which made it very hard to start working and applying my skills."* This illustrates the need for more efficient administrative processes to support the reintegration of deported immigrants.

Discussion***Interpretation of Findings:***

We interpreted our qualitative findings about our research questions and the existing literature. We explained that themes such as inadequate policy support and social stigma hindered reintegration, highlighting that addressing these issues could lead to significant economic benefits, often referred to as brain gain. We compared our findings with previous studies, such as those by Docquier and Rapoport (2012), to situate my work within the broader literature on migration and development. Additionally, we applied the Human Capital Theory (HCT) framework to understand how the skills and knowledge of deported immigrants could be transformed into economic advantages for Nigeria. By aligning our analysis with HCT, we demonstrated that investments in human capital—such as education and training—can drive productivity and innovation, further supporting the potential for brain gain despite the reintegration challenges.

Implications and Recommendations:

Based on our study's findings, several key implications emerged that are critical for policy and practice in Nigeria. We discovered that by implementing an integrated reintegration strategy, deportation could be transformed into a developmental asset. In other words, instead of viewing deportation solely as a loss of human capital, Nigeria could harness deported immigrants' skills, knowledge, and experience to drive innovation, productivity, and overall economic growth, which is often called brain gain.

Our study revealed that current policy frameworks in Nigeria are fragmented and do not fully address the diverse challenges returnees face. This finding highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reintegration programs that combine vocational training, financial support, and social services. Such programs would help returnees re-enter the local labor market more effectively and ensure that their valuable skills are put to productive use. Additionally, our analysis suggested that policymakers must work together to develop a well-defined policy framework that streamlines processes, reduces bureaucratic hurdles, and minimizes social stigmas, thereby supporting the reintegration process.

Another important implication of our study was the crucial role of social and community support. Our findings showed that involving families and local communities in the reintegration process can significantly reduce the negative impacts of deportation, such as stigmatization and isolation. This type of support creates a more welcoming environment for returnees, which can lead to a smoother and more successful transition back into society. Moreover, our research called for further exploration of the reintegration dynamics through future studies,

mainly longitudinal research that tracks returnees over time. Such studies would provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of reintegration programs on national development and help policymakers refine these initiatives to meet the needs of returning migrants better.

Based on these findings, we recommend several specific actions for leveraging deportations for brain gain and sustainable economic growth in Nigeria:

1. **Centralized Support Hotline:** Establish a single, accessible hotline for deported migrants to report issues or seek guidance, ensuring they can quickly connect with support services.
2. **Technical Assistance for Income-Generating Activities:** Provide returnees involved in income-generating activities with technical and vocational training to help them adapt their skills to local market conditions.
3. **Comprehensive Policy Framework:** Develop and implement a well-defined policy framework specifically for the reintegration of deported migrants. This framework should address their economic, social, and cultural needs through coordinated support programs.
4. **Family and Community Involvement:** Actively involve families and local communities in reintegration to create a supportive environment that reduces social stigma.
5. **Integrated Reintegration Programs:** Design programs that combine training, counseling, and financial assistance to address both professional and personal challenges returnees face.
6. **Regulation of Brokers:** Implement measures to monitor and regulate intermediaries to prevent the exploitation of deportees during the reintegration process.
7. **Transitional Allowance:** Consider providing a temporary financial allowance to deported migrants to help ease their financial challenges during the initial reintegration phase.
8. **International Wage Negotiations:** Engage with destination countries or international organizations to negotiate fair wages for returning migrants, ensuring they receive equitable compensation for their skills and experiences.

These recommendations were grounded in insights from similar studies and policy reviews (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2017; Bilkis, 2022) and provide a strategic framework for converting the challenges of deportation into opportunities for brain gain. By addressing these areas, Nigeria could enhance its reintegration process, fully harness the potential of its returnees, and ultimately drive sustainable economic growth.

Summary of Main Findings:

In summary, the study concluded that even though deported Nigerian immigrants face significant challenges when they return, they have great potential to drive economic growth if proper reintegration strategies are implemented. In other words, with the right support systems, these returnees can significantly boost innovation and productivity in Nigeria.

Based on the findings, I recommended several actions: comprehensive policy reforms, improved support services, and targeted interventions to ensure a successful reintegration process. These recommendations aim to create a structured and supportive environment where returnees can fully utilize their skills and contribute to national development. Overall, the study highlights that by addressing the reintegration challenges, Nigeria can transform deportation from a loss into an asset for sustainable economic development. These conclusions are consistent with the reviewed literature, including Docquier and Rapoport (2012), highlighting that effective reintegration strategies can positively influence a country's economic growth.

Conclusion

In summary, our study found that deported Nigerian immigrants face significant challenges when they return home, including inadequate policy support, social stigma, bureaucratic hurdles, and skill mismatches. However, our findings also reveal a substantial opportunity for Nigeria to transform these challenges into a developmental asset through brain gain. By implementing an integrated reintegration strategy that includes comprehensive policy reforms, coordinated support programs, and active involvement from families and local communities, Nigeria can effectively harness the skills and knowledge of returnees to drive national development. Our recommendations, which include establishing a centralized support hotline, offering technical assistance, and negotiating fair wages internationally, are grounded in insights from similar studies and policy reviews (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2017; Bilkis, 2022). Overall, if these strategic interventions are implemented, the reintegration process could ease the transition for deported individuals and contribute to sustainable economic growth in Nigeria. Future research, particularly longitudinal studies, is needed to explore these dynamics further and refine the proposed interventions.

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