

Increasing Student Enrolment in Tourism Programmes at Nigeria's Universities: Perspectives of the National Open University of Nigeria's (NOUN) BSc Tourism Studies Programme Administrators

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Article History	Abstract
Accepted: 27 June 2024 Revised: 18 November 2024 Published: 05 December 2024	<p><i>The BSc tourism studies programme at the National Open University of Nigeria's (NOUN) major study centres is experiencing instability in student enrolment. This study examined the attracting and retaining strategies being used by 10 key administrators of the NOUN to boost student enrolment in the programme, using a semi-structured interview technique, based Koch et al.'s student enrolment model. The research participants comprised 6 study centre directors (1 from each of the 6 geopolitical zones of Nigeria), the director of the NOUN's learners support services, the dean of the faculty where the programme is domiciled, and the head of the programme. Results from the transcribed interviews which were content-analysed based on the student enrolment model and emergent themes show that although the NOUN's stakeholders are making efforts, including visiting public places with flyers to inform prospective students about the programme, more needs to be done, especially by the host department to boost student enrolment in the programme. Consequently, these findings suggest the need for concerted efforts among the NOUN's stakeholders to adopt and design measures to help identify and address low student enrolment in the programme, including changing its name to e.g., BSc Tourism and Hospitality Management.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>Tourism programme, University, Student enrolment, Attracting strategies, Retaining strategies.</i></p>



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INTRODUCTION

Tourism comprises "the processes, activities, and outcomes arising from the relationships and interactions amongst tourists, tourism suppliers, host governments, host communities, and surrounding environments that are involved in the attracting and hosting of visitors"(Goeldner & Ritchie, 2003, pp. 5-6 in Majebi, 2021). The tourism industry is a major employer, contributing to economic growth and employment opportunities among other sectors of the global economy (International Labour Organisation, 2016; UN Tourism, 2023). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024), in 2022, the travel and tourism sector contributed 7.6% to global GDP. This indicates a 22% increase from 2021 and only 23% below the 2019 levels. This increase resulted in 22 million new jobs, representing a 7.9% increase in 2021 and only 11.4% below the 2019 pre-pandemic

levels (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024). Also, the UN Tourism (2023) affirmed that international tourism is expected to fully recover pre-pandemic levels in 2024, with initial estimates pointing to 2% growth above the 2019 levels. In Africa, travel and tourism contributed 7% to GDP and employed 25.1 million people in 2019 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). In Nigeria, although there is no reliable data on the tourism industry, the World Travel & Tourism Council’s (2022) report suggests that the Nigerian travel and tourism sector’s contribution to the GDP is expected to grow by 10.4% and provide 2.5 million jobs by the end of 2022.

Nigeria’s tourism and hospitality sectors have the potential to gain increased foreign earnings and the development of its domestic tourism subsectors despite its dwindling oil-dependent economy and security crisis concerns (Ajudua et al., 2021; Majebi, 2021; Adesina-Uthman et al., 2023). This positive outlook is reflected in the most recent UNWTO Tourism Confidence Index survey, with 67% of tourism professionals indicating better prospects for 2024 compared to 2023 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). Nonetheless, the continuous growth of global tourism must also consider the role of skilled manpower in service delivery. The strength of any industry is determined by its trained human capital resources, this is important for the tourism industry and wider subsectors given its dependence on the human interface (Majebi, 2013) and quality service delivery (Bello & Majebi, 2018). In this regard, educational institutions, including universities play important roles in enrolling students into their tourism and hospitality programmes. According to Okojie (2023), improved investment in education and training programmes aimed at developing a skilled workforce for Nigeria’s tourism and hospitality sectors is important for sustainability.

Tourism training in Nigeria

Whereas the need for trained manpower has been established, it is important to identify the levels of tourism-related training programmes in Nigeria (see Table 1).

Table 1. Available Tourism-related programmes in Nigeria.

Programmes	Awards								
	Certificate	Vocational	Diploma	National Diploma	Higher National Diploma	Bachelor	Post Graduate Diploma	Masters	Doctoral Degree
Archaeology and Tourism						X	X	X	X
Business Administration Tourism and Hospitality								X	
Business Administration with Tourism Option								X	
Commerce with Tourism and						X			

Hospitality Management									
Events Management						X			
Home and Hotel Management						X			
Hospitality Management						X			
Hospitality Management Technology				X	X				
Leisure and Tourism				X	X				
Management with tourism and Travel Options							X		
Management with tourism and Leisure Options							X		
Tourism Administration						X		X	
Tourism and Hospitality Management						X	X	X	
Tourism and Hotel Management			X						
Tourism and Recreation								X	
Tourism Management						X	X		
Tourism, Hospitality and Events Management						X			
Tourism Studies	X		X			X	X		
Tourism, Park Management and Wildlife									X
Travel and Tourism	X	X	X						
Travel and Tourism Training			X						
Travel and Tourism Management						X		X	

Note. Adapted from: Babalola and Olapade (2014, p. 41) & The RealMina (2023).

Although Table 1 shows that there are more tourism-related programmes being offered at the bachelor’s degree level (at universities), it is interesting to find that only a few universities (22) out of over 260 universities are offering the programme in Nigeria (see Table 2).

Table 2. List of Universities offering tourism-related programmes in Nigeria.

S/N	Universities	Region
1	University of Abuja	Northcentral
2	Kwara State University, Ilorin	Northcentral
3	Federal University, Wukari, Taraba State	Northeast
4	Capital City University, Kano State	Northwest
5	Skyline University, Kano State	Northwest
6	University of Nigeria	Southeast
7	Imo State University, Owerri	Southeast
8	Gregory University, Uturu	South-East
9	Michael Okpara University of Agricultural Umudike	South-East
10	Cross River State University of Science & Technology, Calabar	South-south
11	University of Port-Harcourt	South-south
12	Benson Idahosa University, Benin City	South-south
13	Western Delta University, Oghara Delta State	South-south
14	Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State	Southwest
15	Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FUNAAB)	Southwest
16	Ekiti State University	Southwest
17	Elizade University, Ilara-Mokin	Southwest
18	Olabisi Onabanjo, University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State	Southwest
19	Redeemer's University, Mowe	Southwest
20	Wesley University of Science & Technology, Ondo	Southwest
21	University of Ibadan	Southwest
22	National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)	Study Centres across all the Geopolitical Zones

Note. Source: Adapted from: Various sources (2023).

Also, recent student enrolment data at a Nigerian university suggest that only a few students were enrolled in tourism-related programmes where they are being offered. For example, the 2018-2022 student enrolment data (see Table 3) of the National Open University of Nigeria [NOUN] shows its tourism programme recorded one of the lowest enrolment of students when compared with other key programmes in the NOUN's faculty of social sciences, across its over 100 various study centres in Nigeria. (National Open University of Nigeria, 2023).

Table 3. Number of enrolled students at NOUN's faculty of social sciences (2018-2022).

S/N	Programme	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
1	B.Sc. Economics	1535	1391	992	966	987
2	B.Sc. Mass Communication	1683	1833	1206	2104	2517
5	B.Sc. Political Science	1675	1513	1252	1211	1334
6	B.Sc. Tourism Studies	95	126	201	289	377
7	B.Sc. Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution	1154	1265	1102	1207	1419
10	B.Sc. Criminology and Security Studies	2443	2588	2263	2426	2401
12	B.Sc. Broadcast Journalism	-	-	77	65	58
13	B.Sc. Film Production	-	-	59	118	125
14	B.Sc. International Relations	1	-	668	1048	580
15	B.Sc. Development Studies	-	-	53	96	127

Note. Source: Adapted from: National Open University's Directorate of Information System (2023).

This paper contributes to the literature on measures toward increased student enrolment in tourism-related programmes. This article draws on a scant but broad empirical literature on the factors impacting students' decisions not to study tourism and hospitality-related programmes at universities. Nonetheless, this paper makes a unique contribution as there is a dearth of research exploring critical stakeholders' (study centre directors, head of the department, dean of faculty, and learners support services) efforts toward ensuring that requisite policies/measures are in place to attract prospective undergraduate students to enrol in tourism-related degree programmes. This can help to improve human resources service delivery in the sector and the economic gains of host organisations and destinations. Accordingly, Vauda et al.'s (2020) study on the economic and social impact of tourism degree education suggests that students who possess degrees perform better than those who do not. Moreover, existing studies rely mostly on secondary/quantitative analyses, with limited qualitative insights from a developing destination (e.g., Nigeria) perspective (Booyens, 2020).

This article attempts to fill this gap as it seeks the perspective of Nigeria's educational stakeholders towards increased enrolment of students for tourism-related programmes for enhanced service delivery and the socioeconomic development of their tourism industry and subsectors. This article is structured as follows: Literature on factors affecting students' enrolment in the sectors, and the importance of human resources for the tourism industry and subsectors. It also includes justification for the adaption of Koch et al. (2010) student enrolment model which explains how students can be attracted, retained in an educational programme, and placed to encourage other prospective students in the study context. The findings of this study are organised into key sections, providing analysis and discussions on the perspectives of relevant stakeholders (study centre directors, head of department, dean of faculty director of learners' support services) who can influence an increase in students' enrolment in the BSc tourism studies programme at the National Open University of Nigeria's major study centres.

Literature Review

Factors Influencing Students' enrolment in tourism-related programmes.

Emerging studies have identified a few factors affecting the enrolment of students into tourism/hospitality-related programmes at academic institutions, albeit without a clear solution on how to address them, especially in a developing destination context. For example, according to Hoof et al. (2014) factors affecting students' enrolment into hospitality (or tourism) programmes include the admission process, faculty interaction, living conditions, programme/faculty reputation, and location. Also, the study of Tjitunga et al. (2023) reveals that limited measures towards identifying student concerns, including immigration and visa-related issues, lack of accommodation, and safety and security can negatively impact enrolment into tourism-related programmes. In addition to these institution's specific factors, other constraints to student enrolment into tourism-related programmes at institutions have been identified. According to Matazu (2015), this includes concerns about working for, long hours, relatively low pay, and poor employment conditions. These findings are consistent with the findings of other recent studies (Fagbolu & Fallon, 2021; Tapfuma et al., 2021; Thetsane et al., 2020), albeit with a few variations, regarding job satisfaction, and enrolment to study tourism-related programmes as a last resort and due to high unemployment. Also, the study of Benaraba

et al. (2022) suggests that students are uncertain about careers in the tourism-related subsectors due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in social restriction measures and the closure of businesses. These findings have significant implications for hospitality/tourism administrators and educators who may have few students enrolled in their programmes. Thus, the question that emanates here is; what are strategies being deployed by educational institutions (e.g. universities) towards attracting prospective tourism students to their programme?

Nonetheless, a few other studies suggest that some students are attracted to tourism-related programmes for variable reasons, including levels of studies, entrepreneurship potential, and pleasant working/interactive environment. Regarding levels of study, Kipkosgei et al. (2015) found that more diploma-level students would prefer to pursue entrepreneurship compared to undergraduate students who may seek formal employment in tourism-related subsectors. However, a study conducted by Vaduva et al. (2020) that involved 170 entrepreneurs and managers from the tourism sector found that students with formal university degrees would be preferable for employment, as they perform better than those without them. Nonetheless, Ndou et al. (2019) find that tourism education programmes are becoming aware of the relevance of entrepreneurship-related education and the role they can play in boosting entrepreneurial mindsets by helping students develop capacity, competence, and the right attitude to transform new ideas, and technologies, and inventions into commercially viable products and services to create economic and social value. Regarding interaction with others, the study of Manna & Abou-Shouk (2020) suggests that the tourism work environment is pleasant, the interaction with foreigners while working is exciting and it is possible to get along with colleagues in the tourism profession. Despite this positive perception of tourism programmes, it is pertinent to unravel the strategies being deployed by educational institutions (e.g. universities) in collaboration with relevant stakeholders towards motivating existing students to remain in tourism programmes, to serve as marketers of their programmes to prospective students.

Conceptual Framework/Model

Koch et al. (2010) student enrolment model (see Figure 1) has been adapted for this study. The model can be deployed to address the decline in students' enrolment in tourism-related programmes at institutions (e.g. universities). The model suggests that authorities at educational institutions can introduce "initiatives to attract, retain, and place students" (Igberaharha & Onyesom, 2021) in educational programmes.

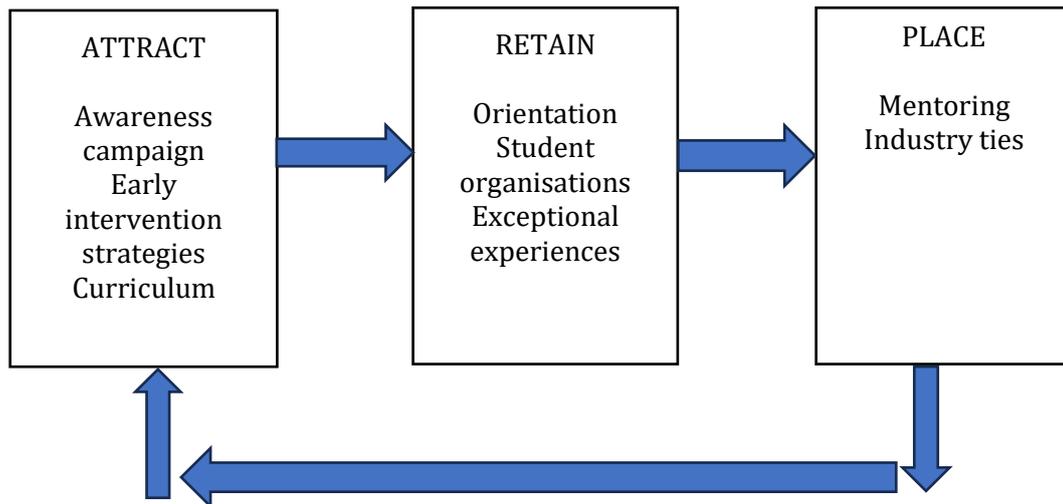


Figure 1. A programme perspective on hospitality and tourism studies student enrolment.
Source: Adapted from Igberaharha & Onyesom (2021).

Extant studies (Igberaharha & Onyesom, 2021; Koch et al., 2010; Ramchander & Naude, 2018) which adopted the model suggest that the approach depicts an affirmative cycle that turns successful graduates into fulfilled customers whose testimonies and recommendations would encourage prospective students to a programme. Attracting prospective students would require creating awareness campaigns, event hosting, early interventions, and curriculum redesign (Igberaharha & Onyesom, 2021).

Awareness campaigns in the tourism-related programme context involve communicating with the public about the role of tourism education in the socioeconomic development of society, highlighting the diverse job opportunities and progression, and entrepreneurship potentials for graduates. Awareness campaigns have the potential to stimulate interest and create motivation for tourism-related programmes among young secondary school leavers, parents, and other stakeholders. Moreover, Chukwuka & Glory Nma (2015) and Igberaharha & Onyesom (2021) suggest that enrolment mobilisation should focus on attracting students and their parents' interests. The awareness campaign can include, having updated recruiting materials, social media groups; Facebook, X-handle, and days when staff members of the institutions wear vests that have the inscriptions of their programmes on them. This can also include hosting open days at designated host schools for prospective students.

In addition to several measures that can be deployed to attract prospective students to tourism-related programmes, it is pertinent to develop mechanisms for retaining students already enrolled in the programme. This can include setting up effective and engaging student societies and offering them special opportunities (Oviawe, 2015) to participate in events designed to boost the visibility of their programmes and learning experiences. This can include field trips, international visits, placement experiences, competitive engagements, etc.

These measures can help boost student enrolment in tourism programmes and reduce revenue loss and livelihood that can result in a decline in student enrolment and retention at affected institutions. Thus, this study is concerned that if concerted efforts are not developed to attract and retain students to tourism-related programmes at designated institutions (e.g. universities in Nigeria), there could be a shortage of skilled trained manpower, with its attendant socioeconomic implications for the tourism industry. Although other studies have

been conducted to determine the strategies for improving students' enrolment in vocational-technical (Michael, 2020) and business education (Igberaharha & Onyesom, 2021) programmes, this study is the first to investigate measures being deployed by a university authority in Nigeria toward attracting and retaining the BSc tourism studies programme students who could eventually serve as marketers of the programme.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article aims to answer the following research questions: What is the enrolment rate into tourism-related programmes at the six main campuses of the NOUN? What measures are being deployed by the authorities of the NOUN at its six main study campuses to attract and retain tourism programme students? What insights emerged from the NOUN authorities at its headquarters and study centres that could inform intervention policies from the NOUN management toward attracting and retaining tourism programme students?

This study is evaluative and descriptive. Data was generated from secondary and primary sources to gather relevant information for the study. Existing literature on students' perceptions of tourism-related programmes, strategies for increasing students' enrolment, and records on tourism students' enrolment from the NOUN's students' data unit constituted the initial secondary information for the study. The primary data involved semi-structured/in-depth with key stakeholders (study centre directors and desk officers) at the six study centres of the NOUN, and tourism lecturers at the University's headquarters. This was aimed at retrieving information from the NOUN's stakeholders (research participants) on strategies being deployed for attracting, retaining, and encouraging tourism programme students to serve as marketers of their programme, based on Koch's (2010) students' enrolment strategies adapted for the study.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study sites and research participants for primary data collection were purposively selected. The study sites were selected based on the availability of registered BSc tourism students across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria (see Table 4), and the need to evaluate the role of study site directors and those of key academic and administrative heads in boosting the BSc tourism student enrolment.

Table 4. Enroled BSc tourism studies students at selected study centres of NOUN (2019-2023).

Geopolitical zones (study centres)/Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Northcentral (Abuja)	41	43	51	64	78
Northeast (Jalingo)	4	2	1	2	6
Northwest (Kaduna)	14	9	11	12	14
Southeast (Enugu)	3	3	3	5	6
Southsouth (Porthacurt)	2	9	15	20	24
Southwest (Lagos)	49	65	122	180	249
Total	113	131	203	283	377

Note. Source: Adapted from National Open University's Directorate of Information System (2024).

Therefore, 6 major study centres, 1 for each geopolitical zone and the university's headquarters were selected for the study. There were four categories of research participants

for the study. First is the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS), where the BSc. Tourism Studies programme is domiciled. Second is the head of the programme. The third is the Director of Learners’ Support Services (DLSS) who oversees the Study Centre (SCs), on behalf of the Vice Chancellor. Fourth are the 6 Study Centre Directors (SCD) and experienced former SCD of the selected sites for the study. Thus, 10 participants (interviewees) from the key study centres were selected and agreed to participate in the research as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Study centres and profile of the research participants (interviewees).

Geopolitical Zones/ Headquarters	Study Centres (SC)/ Headquarters	Interviewees/code	No. of interviewees
Federal Capital Territory (Headquarters)	Abuja, Northcentral Nigeria	Dean	1
		Head, BSc. TS	1
		DLSS	1
Northcentral	Abuja (A) Wuse/Model SC	SCDA	1
Northeast	Jalingo (J) SC	SCDJ	1
Northwest	Kaduna (K) SC	SCDK	1
Southeast	Owerri (E) SC	SCDO	1
South-south	Portharcourt (P)SC	SCDP	1
Southwest	Lagos (L)/Abeokuta SC	SCDL/SCDA	2
Total Research Participants			10

Note. D-Director; DLSS- Directorate of Learners Support Services; SC- Study Centres; TS-Tourism Studies. Source: Authors’ (Field interview, 2024).

Students were excluded from the research as the secondary data had already established that there is variability in the enrolment of students into tourism programmes over the last 5 years (2018-2023) (See Table 4). Whereas other major programmes in the faculty of social sciences experienced increased student enrolment, despite some decrease in students between 2019 and 2023 in some instances, across the 6 study centres (see Table 6). For example, while the BSc. tourism studies programme had only 41 and 78 students enrolled in 2019 and 2023 respectively at the Northcentral region of the university’s study centre, the BSc. economics programme had 525 and 392 students enrolled for the same period in the same region.

Table 6. Students in Key Programmes at the faculty of social sciences of NOUN (2019/2023).

BSc. Programmes	2019/2023					
	North- central	North-east	North-west	South-east	South- south	South- west
Criminology & Security Studies	879/742	62/39	205/219	244/73	321/227	707/67 7
Economics	525/392	26/14	95/61	219/58	252/109	677/51 6
Mass Communicati on	545/661	12/20	55/86	170/55	295/179	1096/ 1580
Peace Studies & Conflict Resolution	484/409	82/26	104/79	92/45	180/96	251/24 8

Political Science	697/406	21/11	130/99	240/55	343/110	907/568
Tourism	41/78	4/6	14/14	3/6	2/24	49/249

Note. Incline figures indicate 2023 enrolment. Source: Adapted from National Open University's Directorate of Information System (2024).

The significant variation in student enrolment in the BSc tourism studies programme is, perhaps, due to several factors, including low pay, unsociable hours, lack of job satisfaction etc., in the tourism industry, as established in extant literature (Tapfuma et al., 2021). Thus, there is a need to assess the perceptions of the NOUN stakeholders (study centre directors, dean of faculty, head of department, learners support services director) on the trend of tourism students' enrolment/registration into the programme, and measures being deployed to attract and retain students.

Ethical Consideration

A study which seeks to retrieve direct information from a group of study participants requires that adequate measures must be taken by the researcher to ensure that the study participants are (i) treated with respect, (ii) protected from any form of harm, and (iii) safeguarded from any form of embarrassment (Donnelly et al., 2013; Ivanov, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019) The researchers did not envisage any harm to the subjects of the research and the researchers alike, as well as the sites of the study where primary research was conducted. Therefore, before the interview sessions with each of the participants, consent forms were provided confirming that

- A. They have read and comprehended the information sheet.
- B. They are informed that their participation is voluntary and can withdraw from participating in the study at any time.
- C. That information could be used in future reports and article presentations.
- D. That their anonymity and confidentiality are respected.

In addition, the participants' consent was sought to use data on student enrolment for research purpose only.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The researchers collected data from the research sample by making initial contact via telephone/zoom meeting and visiting the SCs located in Abuja (Northcentral) Jalingo (Northeast), Kaduna (Northwest), Owerri (Southeast), Portharcourt (Southsouth) and Lagos/Abeokuta (Southwest) Nigeria. The lead researcher was the chief interviewer at the study sites and notes were taken by other research team members for comparison and analysis. In-depth interview schedules were used to guide the interview sessions with the research participants at the university headquarters and 6 SCs, after seeking their consent as stated in the ethical section of this study. The interview questions were framed based on the study's conceptual framework (Koch's (2010) student enrolment strategies) which sought strategies being employed by the study participants toward attracting student enrolment into the University's tourism programme and retaining them to serve as marketers to prospective students. The developed interview questions were the same for the SCs and open-ended to the

research participants. Each interview session lasted 15 to 25 minutes at the research participants' offices and via telephone. The interview sessions were recorded with the consent of the research participants for analysis and research reporting purposes.

The interviewees' responses were analysed using a simple coding technique to reflect the interviewees' perceptions of student enrolment into the tourism programme at the SCs, and measures being deployed to boost enrolment. This helped the researchers match the interviewees' responses to existing themes reflected in the study's conceptual framework and identify emergent themes on strategies to increase students' enrolment into the NOUN's tourism programme at the study sites. To complement the information gathered from the participants, available documents on tourism students' enrolment/registration were sought to examine the pattern of student enrolment at the SCs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of the data from the interview sessions with the 10 key administrators (research participants) of the BSc tourism studies programme at the selected study centres and headquarters of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) are presented in this section. Based on the study's conceptual framework (Koch's (2010) student enrolment strategies), this section presents an analysis of the research participants' opinions on (i) the rate of student enrolment into the programme; (ii) strategies being deployed toward attracting student enrolment, and (iii) strategies for retaining enrolled students in the programme.

Rate of student enrolment in the BSc Tourism Studies programme

The opinions of the research participants (the dean, head of programme, learner support director, and study centre directors) varied when asked about their opinion on student enrolment rate/pattern into the BSc Tourism Studies programme in the last 5 years. Nonetheless, they all agreed that there is a need for more innovative measures towards increased student enrolment in the programme, as the student enrolment figures varied across the study centres and were low compared with other programmes. For example, a key administrator at the NOUN's headquarters, where the BSc Tourism Studies is administered among other programmes in his faculty said,

Although I am unable to ascertain whether there is an increase/decrease in enrolment due to the flexibility of student enrolment and suspension of studies in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of education, we recently spoke with the University management regarding adjustment to criteria for the admission of students with other qualifications to be admitted into the BSc. Tourism programme. This is expected to facilitate increased enrolment of students in the next year. Nonetheless, more can be done at the level of the study centres, for example like I did when I was a study centre director to enhance student enrolment. (DFSSHQ, personal communication, April 17, 2024).

DFSSHQ's statement is somewhat congruent with those of some research participants at the NOUN's headquarters (DLSSHQs & HTSHQs) and study centres (SCDA & SCDL). They affirmed that, even though there seems to be a relative increase in student enrolment in recent

times (HTSHQs), more can be done at the host faculty and department (DLSSHQs & HTSHQs) and at the study centres (DLSSHQs) to improve student enrolment into the programme.

However, other research participants (SCDJ, SC DK, SC DO and SC DP) from Northeast, Northwest, Southeast and South regions do not consider student enrolment in the programme to be increasing. For example, an experienced key administrator of the NOUN's major study centre in the Southeast regions of Nigeria said,

The transfer of the BSc. Tourism Programme from one faculty to the other in previous and recent times seems to have adversely impacted on students enrolment into the programme, despite my effort to communicate with the administrators of the programme at the NOUN's headquarters to address this problem (SC DO/SC DP, personal communication, April 15, 2024).

SC DO/SC DP's statement is congruent with those of other study directors (SC DJ and SC DK) of the NOUN in the Northeast, Northwest, and Southwest regions of Nigeria. For example, an experienced administrator of major study centres in the Northeast said,

The enrolment of students into the BSc Tourism Studies programme is not increasing but static as I have experienced in my current study centre and the previous one in the last 3 years of being a study centre director (SC DK, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

SC DK's statement is congruent with those of other study centre directors who said,

In the last 5 years, student enrolment in the BSc Tourism Studies programme has not increased but decreased. This is perhaps due to the disinterest of prospective students in the programme. (SC DJ, personal communication, May 2, 2024).

On the other hand, an experienced study centre in a southwest region of the NOUN said, "I cannot tell whether there is an increase or decrease in student enrolment in a particular programme such as the BSc. Tourism Studies programme. However, I do not think the programme is attractive enough to encourage an increase in student enrolment. This is due to the limited awareness about it, and lack of interest of prospective students. (SC DA, personal communication, April 17, 2024)".

In summary, the results revealed 3 key findings. First, the BSc Tourism Studies programme administrators at the NOUN's headquarters and 2 directors of its study centres in the Northcentral and Southwest regions note that there is an appreciable/expected increase in student enrolment due to adjustments in admission criteria. Second, the directors of the four other key study centres in the Northeast, Northwest, Southsouth, and Southeast regions of the university do not consider an increase in student enrolment in the BSc Tourism Studies programme, owing to a lack of awareness and perhaps the interest of prospective students. Third, both the programme administrators at the headquarters and study centre directors (i.e. all research participants) stated that there is a need for concerted efforts among all stakeholders to boost student enrolment in the BSc Tourism Studies programme.

Strategies for attracting student enrolment

Awareness campaign

The research participants were somewhat unanimous that attracting more students to the BSc Tourism Studies programme through awareness campaigns in public places and using promotional posters is needed. Nonetheless, their opinions varied when asked about their role

in adapting specific strategies to attract students to the programme. For example, an experienced senior official in the south-south study centre of the NOUN said,

“It is the responsibility of the host department to develop awareness strategies that can help to attract students to the programme. Ours is to implement what the department suggests. As you know, the BSc Tourism Studies is only 1 out of several programmes at the study centre. Nevertheless, we visit public places to tell people about our programmes, including stating their job/employment prospects so they can make their choices. (SCDP, personal communication, April 15, 2024)”.

The statement of SCDP is congruent with those of other NOUN study centres key officials (SCDJ, SCDK, SCDA and SCDO) in the Northeast, Northwest, Southeast and Southwest of Nigeria. These findings suggest that the host department plays a significant role in developing strategies in collaboration with other NOUN’s key stakeholders to increase student enrolment in their programme at the various study centres. This is necessary as the study centres oversee the administration of several other programmes on behalf of the university.

Strategies for retaining student enrolment

Prompt response to student complaints/inquiries

The promptness of the NOUN’s staff response to students’ complaints/inquiries is a significant strategy that this study unravelled that can help to retain the BSc Tourism Students’ scant population. For example, a senior official at the NOUN’s headquarters where the BSc Tourism Studies programme is administered said,

“To retain the few students in the programme and encourage them to tell others about the programme, there is a need to respond swiftly to their complaints. (DFSSHQS, personal communication, April 17, 2024)”.

DFSSHQS’s statement is congruent with those of other senior officials (SCDK, SCDP) at the NOUN’s study centres in the Northwest and Southsouth of Nigeria. They affirm the need for prompt responses to student inquiries by requisite staff members, as it can help to discourage students from leaving the programme.

Mandatory internship at requisite organisations

The research participants at the NOUN’s headquarters and study centres who participated in this research affirm that mandatory Students Industrial Work Experiences (SIWES) is an innovative way to retain students in the BSc Tourism Studies programme. For example, a senior official at the NOUN’s headquarters where the programme is being administered said,

To encourage students to remain in the programme and as a requirement for graduation, students are expected to participate in a 6-month SIWES training at a requisite organisation of their choice to acquire practical knowledge of the programme. (HTSHQs, personal communication, April 12, 2024).

Orientation programmes for incoming and returning students

Similarly, all the research participants stated that to retain students in the BSc Tourism Studies programmes, among several others at the NOUN's study centres, they conduct scheduled orientation and reorientation exercises for the returning and incoming students. For example, a senior official of the NOUN's study centre in south-south Nigeria said,

We try to retain and grow our student population by conducting orientation exercises every semester to acquaint students with our programmes and to inform them on how to go about their programmes and where to find helpful information about their studies and other concerns. This is done across all the NOUN's study centres (SCDP, personal communication, April 15, 2024).

SCDP's statement is congruent with those of other research participants. This includes senior officials of the BSc Tourism Studies at the NOUN's headquarters (DFSSHQs, HTSHQs and DLSSHQs). For example, a senior official (DLSSHQs) of the NOUN's support services affirmed that the scheduled orientation exercises help to enhance the student population and provide avenues for them to ask questions or state their concerns.

Discussion of findings

This study examined the measures adopted by the National Open University Nigeria's (NOUN) stakeholders (study centre directors, head of the department, dean of faculty, and learners support services director) towards boosting student enrolment in its BSc Tourism Studies department at its study centres. Firstly, a significant finding from the research was that most of the research participants affirmed that due to the low student enrolment in the programme, there is a need for collaborative measures among the university's stakeholders to improve student enrolment into the programme. Secondly, the study revealed that the decline in student enrolment at most of the major study centres can be attributed to, a change of name of the programme from BSc. hospitality management to BSc. tourism studies, delays in response to students' inquiries, and inadequate awareness of the programme in some regions in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the study revealed strategies the NOUN's stakeholders use to attract and retain students in the programme. Regarding strategies to attract students to the BSc tourism studies programme, the stakeholders, especially the study centre directors visit public places with flyers to attract students to all their programmes, not necessarily the BSc tourism studies programme. The study notes that it is the responsibility of the department to design strategies to attract students to its programme. This suggests the need for collaboration among the study centre directors, the host department and other key authorities of the NOUN to attract students to its programme. Regarding strategies for retaining students in the BSc tourism studies programme, the research revealed that the NOUN authorities organise scheduled orientation exercises to acquaint students with their services, including inquiries and lodging of complaints. Also, the study shows that both the head of the faculty and the department endeavour to enhance student retention by responding promptly to their inquiries on results among other official concerns. These measures are consistent with Thetsane's (2020) study which suggests the need for a collaborative effort between relevant educational stakeholders to attract current and future tourism and hospitality management students. Also, this study identifies the need

for prompt information from educational authorities when addressing students' inquiries and concerns. This can encourage students to remain in the programme and perhaps help to encourage prospective students to enrol in the BSc Tourism Studies programme. Moreover, Tapfuma (2021) identified the need for institutions to give adequate information (e.g., career opportunities, incentives, etc) to students to help them make informed decisions.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that this study was qualitative and only managed to involve 10 key stakeholders in one university (an open and distance learning institution), out of the other universities (conventional) offering tourism studies-related programmes in the period in question. While the results of this study give significant insights into stakeholders' perceptions about measures they use for attracting and retaining students in tourism studies programmes, the findings may be difficult to generalise for all stakeholders in the universities in Nigeria. In the future, there is a need to carry out a quantitative study involving a larger number of stakeholders, and a comparative study with students from other degree programmes can give an insightful result depicting why students choose not to study tourism studies-related programmes. Such studies can further inform strategies for increasing student enrolment in BSc tourism studies-related programmes at universities and other post-secondary institutions in Nigeria and similar destinations.

Recommendations

This study identifies some measures for attracting and retaining students in the BSc tourism studies and related programmes at the National Open University's major study centres. Firstly, the key university authorities must carry out a semester-based assessment of student enrolment patterns at the study centres to determine the number of students enrolled in the programme, this can influence measures to increase enrolment at the study centres with fewer enrolled students. Secondly, as there seem to be fewer students enrolled in the programme compared to other programmes within the faculty of social sciences where the programme is domiciled at the NOUN, attracting strategies to increase student enrolment can include (i) a change of nomenclature from BSc Tourism Studies to BSc Tourism and Hospitality Management, (ii) creating awareness about the programme at the major study centres of the university, (iii) creating an interactive website for prospective tourism studies students (iv) redesigning current curriculum with attractive courses, etc. Thirdly, as the study established that some students had withdrawn from the programme due to delays in inquiry responses among other concerns, retaining strategies can include (i) prompt response to student inquiries and complaints across the lines of communication at the university headquarters and study centres (ii) encouraging active student organisation, (iii) sponsorship of professional development activities, (iv) providing mentorship programmes, etc.

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