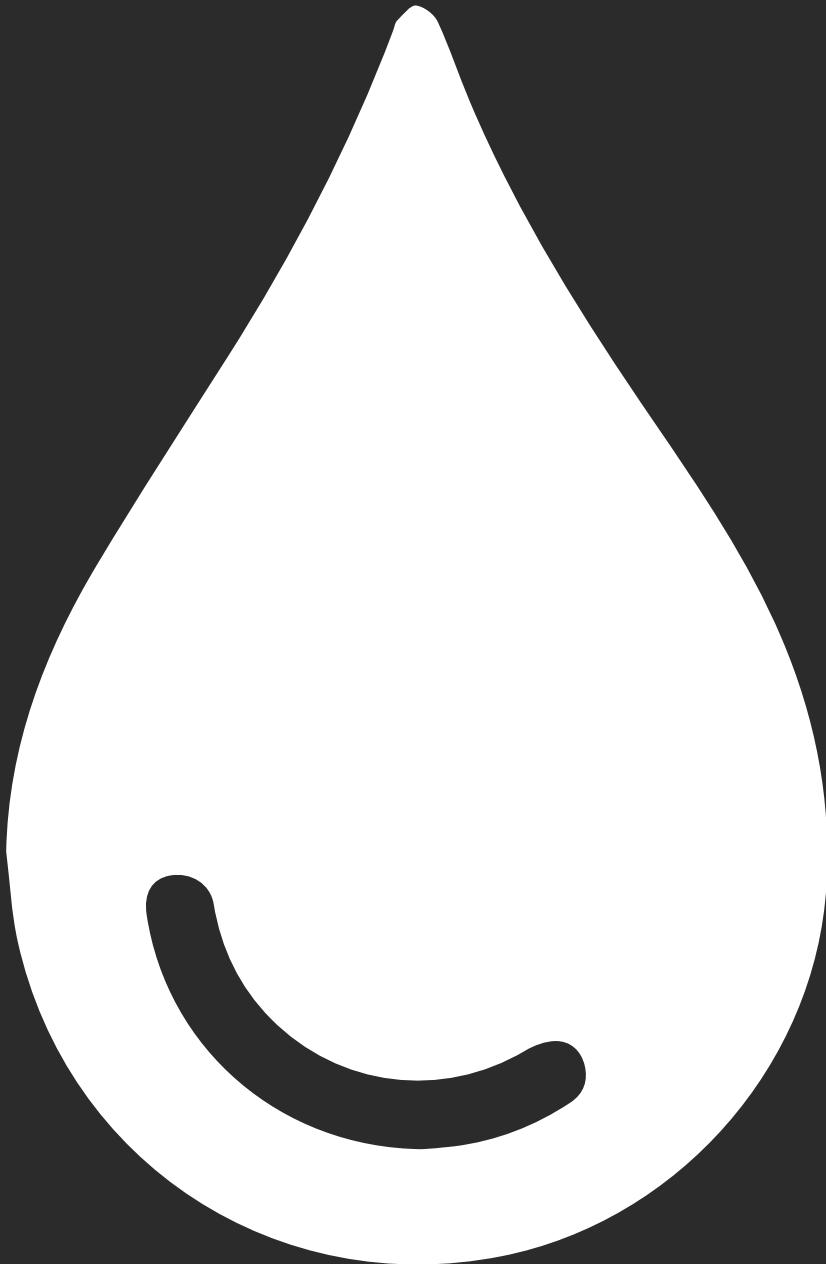


From Lagos to Lethbridge: The Price of Oil and its Cost on Education

By Dan Irete



What is the price of a good education? For many of us it's a some tens of thousands of dollars, but for international students it can be so much more. The University of Lethbridge (according to its website) had 8,453 students at the beginning of the Fall 2016 semester, 548 of which were international students from 94 countries around the world, contributing to just over 6 percent of the student body. The highest numbers of students were from China, with Nigeria being home to the second greatest number of students - if only international students were counted. With the addition of permanent residents, Nigerians made up the largest international student population. In the past year the price of oil has dropped significantly and these students, coming from one oil-producing country and being educated in another, face challenges that are simultaneously unique and familiar. As a Nigerian immigrant I understand many of these issues, but due to my status as a Canadian citizen I am also insulated from them. I spoke to two students, third year English major Golibe and second year management major Emmanuel, to get a better sense of how they understand and deal with these issues.

Post-Secondary education in Nigeria is flawed at best, and this makes education abroad a more logical choice for students. Many public post-secondary institutions are fraught with staff strikes and delays because professors and other staff do not receive their pay on time or do not agree with their working conditions. Emmanuel expressed his frustration with the inefficiency of the system, saying "Sometimes people after high school try to get into university and wait three years, four years, and in that time you could have finished or completed a degree! There's no sense behind it if your parents have the resources to send you abroad and in that span of time you could just complete a degree". As at press time ASUU (Association of Academic Staff Union of Universities) is on a 7 day warning strike while in negotiations with the federal government. Private Universities are insulated from these issues but both Golibe and Emmanuel say they were concerned about corruption and unfair practices like bribes to professors, and extortion of students for handouts that harm the reputation of these universities.

Due to these factors and the lack of job opportunities after graduation, educational migration is commonplace. Nigerians who can afford it (and often those who cannot) send their children overseas in search of a better education and better opportunities. Canada has become a preferred destination because it offers cheaper tuition relative to the United States and higher prospects of post-graduation employment and permanent residence unlike the United Kingdom. In Canada, international students can apply for a post-graduation work permit which can last up to three years and are then eligible to permanently immigrate as a skilled worker through express entry. A similar program like this one existed in the United Kingdom, but was scrapped in 2012 due to changes in immigration policy. Unlike in Canada, student loan programs are not widely available in Nigeria and there are very few opportunities for high school graduates and undergraduate students to earn income. The unemployment rate in Nigeria currently sits between 13 - 14% which is double the Canadian figure of 6.9% and for those aged between 15 and 24 it is a whopping 25%. This is the result of a highly competitive and crowded job market, and an ever growing working age population. The option to get a summer job in construction or a part time job at the local grocery store and see oneself through university simply isn't there for a lot of young people in Nigeria because you compete for those jobs with older, likely more qualified people who are also looking for work. Because of young people's lack of earning power, the onus is usually on family and parents to support student's education financially. So while it may be cheaper to stay in Nigeria, the opportunity to get a better education, better prospects for future employment, and the possibility of permanent residence for yourself (and often your family members as well) makes overseas education a financial risk worth taking for many families.

In the past overseas education worked fine for many Nigerians but economic turmoil has placed a strain on them. In 2014 and 2015 global oil production and supply increased whereas demand decreased in China and Europe's markets. In an interconnected global market, the ripple effects of this slowdown were felt all around the world. Albertans have felt the effects and economic crunch can have on a primarily resource based economy, and in Nigeria it has been even worse. Oil accounts for about 70% of government income and the price of crude oil per barrel has dropped from about \$112 in 2014 to a low of \$29 in January 2016 and just above \$50 currently. The nation's currency, the Naira, has been devalued in the hope of attracting foreign investors but so far the positive effects of that decision are yet to be seen. The country is facing an inflation rate of 17.1%, the highest in eleven years, and the value of the naira has gone from ₦150 per \$1 CDN in 2014 to ₦270 in August 2016. These are official figures and the black market where currency is more readily available is often quoted to upwards of ₦300 to \$1. Nigeria's economy is officially in recession after two consecutive quarters of declining growth. This means the ability of many families to support their children's education has been tested. "Since the Naira is so low" Golibe said "the price of my school fees has basically doubled". This is in the face of tuition amounts for international students which are triple that of Canadian students and Permanent residents - it should be noted, however, that the U of L is not an evil overlord sneakily milking tuition fees from international students, this is common practice in many universities around the world because international students don't have their tuition subsidized by the government. However, there is increasing concern about whether these students are being exploited for profit by universities - and paying the \$16,377 quoted by the university website for a full 10 class course load for the 2015/2016 school year (\$5890 is the cost for Canadian students and Permanent residents) becomes increasingly difficult especially with additional living costs. As Emmanuel says, "You can't apply the same strategy of ₦400 to \$1 as you would ₦150 to \$1, you'll fail".

The low price of oil can be a double whammy for these students as it reduces the earning power of parents back home in Nigeria and, due to its disastrous effect on the Albertan economy, hampers students' earning power here as well. This set of circumstances has understandably created an additional pressure for students to earn more here in Canada. As of June 2014 the Canadian government altered the rules concerning student work permits which previously placed various limits on students' ability to work full time and off campus. Now, international students can work 20 hours a week during the academic year and full time during scheduled breaks whether on or off campus. According to Emmanuel this is a change many students have taken advantage of "they try to make it work for themselves. People work a lot more in the summer to make fall tuition; they try to balance out finances here and there before their parents can make ends meet". This situation may sound familiar to many Canadian students who work in the summer to pay for tuition or pay back their student loans for the previous term. But the cost of tuition is much higher for international students and thus can be very difficult to pay without additional assistance. Far from wanting pity, these students and many others I know stress that the cost of their education motivates them to succeed academically. For Golibe the cost is a constant reminder that she cannot slack off or let her grades slip "every time I'm watching Netflix or I just want to chill, I'm like its millions of naira for me to come here so I remember that. If I'm tired I remember that and I'm like Golibe, stay up. Write this paper. I love my major but at the same time I can't afford to get certain grades".

Globalization is characterized by the increasingly fast flow of goods, services, people, finance, and ideas across international borders. More than a buzzword, it is a lived experience that we participate in every day. We participate in it when we eat bananas from Ecuador, watch anime from Japan, or share Arthur fist memes on Twitter. Globalization is virtually inescapable and the University of Lethbridge is also shaped and molded by these increasing global flows. We live in a world where the price of oil has massive ripple effects that can stretch all the way from the shores of Lagos, Nigeria to the schools of Lethbridge, Alberta. It is often difficult for these students to cope financially, but they do not shy from the challenges they face here or take any the opportunities for granted. Many students are willing to bear the increased burden because it comes with the hope of a brighter future, which makes the challenges worthwhile.