



Growing Pains: Socioeconomic Constraints and Students Coping Strategies in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract. The Nigerian universities is fast becoming boiling pots for students rather than a melting pots of decent academic enterprise and intellectualism where the human mind can be forged into dexterously skilful individuals. The likelihood that students will experience this reality is however froth with threats. This paper develops a prototypical conclusive causality in the Nigerian universities and highlights the issues of socio-economic constraints; the challenges it poses for students and the various coping strategies they deployed to survive. The study uses a mix method with a survey of 368 students. Inadvertently, results show that student experience constraints most of which bothers on economic matters and inabilities. To contest their estate, student often employ social support systems and work part job where opportunity avails in-order to cope. The study reveal that constraints induce anxiety that affects student overall welfare and suggest a student' centred government interventions support programme, a vibrant university scholarship and a wider university economic reform programmes.

Keywords: Constraint, University, Socioeconomic, Student, Survival/Coping strategy.

1. Introduction

The university is regarded as the ivory tower, a learning environment where the gown dictates the pace for the town. It is the empirical and theoretical center of knowledge and a *social-laboratory* where humans are forged into dexterously skilled individuals. In the university, human minds are trained and equipped with requisite skills necessary to drive development and pioneer change (Longe, 2025). Universities are either government owned or privately established. The case of Nigeria is the same where universities are established to offer post-secondary

educational training and services to qualified entrants. Life and learning within Nigerian university is designed to convert biological entities to socially engineered being. Nigerian universities tailor education towards contributing to manpower development, inculcation of veracious values crucial for the survival of both individual and society (Longe, 2025). However, the pursuit of these lofty academic objectives among eligible Nigerian university students is a complex endeavour shaped by array of constraints and unanticipated challenges that tend to inhibit students' ability to realize these goals.

Constraints, it would seem are part of human social-exchange in everyday life stemming from rules, regulations and contingencies occasioned by circumstances. Constraints is operational and could be effective. Albeit, in a controlled environment like the university, it could become inimical, extreme and in given instance perilous. It can limit an individual from attaining excellence and living to full potential when it functions in direct opposite of its original intentionality (Daily Trust, 2024). It can be a challenge that prevents a person from operating at maximum capacity (Van Hove & Katriel, 2006). Thus, the presence of constraints spawns factors that causes difficulty and create discomfort for students in the university. Students view constraints from difference perspective ranging from financial, relational, and psychological stock-piles triggered by university policies, institutional arrangements, lecture hours, healthcare regulations, social-relationships and peer-interaction to economic wellbeing, religious ideologies, group/class values and the loftier social trend of the day among others (Omo-okperaboh, 2025). These constraints trigger anxiety and emotional instability among students that impacts on their mental capacity and self-esteem (Longe, 2025; Okioga, 2013). A student's overall satisfaction and

dissatisfaction is usually tied to these factors. It influences their overall situation, mental state and social wellbeing which include their ability to excel academically, meet up with financial obligations, manage time effectively, and feel secure about the future. It can also ease or create tension for learning and relationships.

Socioeconomic constraints appear to affect students' ability to perform well in the university (Reynolds & Cruise, 2020; Okioga, 2013). This situation among university students in Nigeria has been associated with inability to maintain decent social attitude and relationship, healthy, civil and productive behaviour (Shazia, 2023). This existential risk spawns incapacity to meet essential needs like good accommodation and feeding, decent dressing and the procurement of study materials. Invariably, this instigates feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness among university students. It upshots heightened level of insecurity, anxiety, stress and insomnia which are common symptoms of depression (Longe & Omigie, 2024).

Constraint contributes to discomfort that impacts negatively on student's state of mind and ability to thrive in relevant form of social engagements (Longe & Omigie, 2024). Shraddhesh and Puja (2025) argued that students with high levels of constraint are more prone to anxiety issues and depression, due to the persistent apprehension over material and financial matters. In the same light, Sajeela, Fayyaz and Muhammad (2024) asserted that university students are especially vulnerable to material and financial pressures. The university settings, tuition-fees, rent-bills, peers competition and everyday expenditures weigh heavily on students who are often subject to increased levels of systemic and socioeconomic challenges. This experience, Moore, Nguyen, Rivas, Bany-Mohammed, Majeika, and Martinez (2021) portend could spur violent tendencies and behaviour among students.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

- To identify the constraints encountered by students in Nigerian universities.
- To examine the strategies students employ to survive constraints in Nigerian universities.

1.2 Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between anxiety experienced by student in Nigerian universities and socio-economic constraints.

2. Review of Relevant Literature / Theoretical Underpinning

Socioeconomic viability is essential to students' sustainability in tertiary institutions. It is paramount to their overall wellbeing as students learning within the university environment. For most students in Nigerian tertiary institutions, the lack of access to good socioeconomic resources and support system encumbers the process of living a decent student life on campus (Usaman & Banu, 2019). Though, some university administration operates a work-study system that allows student earn stipends. Students who subscribe to such programs often contest between school and work-program; and usually lag behind in their primary pursuit due to conflicting gap between time management and book work.

A major obstacle to most students' academic success in Nigerian universities is the cost of education, combined with limited social support that intensifies unbearable burden for most students. The increasing cost of living on campuses has become for most students a complex shift of instability and unprecedented burden. An example is the constant change in tuition fees and charges, commodity price, and incessant strike action that checker academic calendar (Okolocha, 2023). This challenges significantly affected students' ability to pursue quality academic qualifications beyond a Bachelor's degree (Suade, Hartono, Erwin, Monalisa, Sharon, 2024; Okolocha, 2023). To this end, most students seek alternatives and coping strategies to navigate perceived socioeconomic challenges. This coping mechanism is a range of assortment from working part-time jobs, hawking materials, to committing fraudulent acts, prostitution/hook ups, shoplifting, and cultism among others to achieve set objectives.

2.1 Student's Challenges and Social Disposition

Students in tertiary institutions are supposed to be comfortable and accorded a high-level social support by the government especially as it pertains to welfare. However, this is not often the case. Most students go through torturous campaign of untold socioeconomic hardship that not only affect their ability to learn and performance well academically, but also their overall-wellbeing and survival (Omo-okperaboh, 2025; Van Ewijk & Slegers, 2010). Given that Nigeria is among the world poorest countries where most families live below three dollars a day (World Bank, 2025); several Nigerian students from less privileged and socioeconomically disadvantaged homes are faced with the daunting challenge between going on and giving up. Most students are caught in the web of

economic hardship due to the epileptic state of the nation's economy. Although, certain interventions like student loans, bursary programme and student work scheme are put in place by government and management of some tertiary institutions to mitigate constraints faced by students, these measures only appear to lubricate the situation rather than alleviating it. The economic situation of the country and the galloping rate of tuition charges and fees make these efforts of no-effect to the Nigerian student. Most students continue to face challenges that hinder their academic success and overall experience in the universities. With restriction in access to essential resources and support the struggle seems continuous for the students. This situation appears to be further exacerbated by widespread corruption, poor student-lecturer interaction and lack of situational awareness among students (Abalogu, & Azor, 2024).

Nigerian students suffer constraints that lead to unprecedented increase in dropout rate, crime rate, heightened psychological and emotional distress, and deviant behaviour. Owoseni, Ibem, & Opoko (2020) argue that this has subjected most students to precarious survival strategies, poor, deplorable living conditions, limited participation due to lack of opportunities in academic and social activities as well as broken their self-worth and esteem among peers. The concern is not only on student's academic performance and ability to complete their education but to healthily survive the socioeconomic challenge that confronts them.

2.2 Students and Coping Strategy

The socioeconomic status of a person in the society centers on referrals like income, education, type of job, access to basic needs such as good-food, decent housing system, and healthcare. They are important factors that predict how well a student is likely to perform in school (UNICEF, 2005). Student's background in Nigeria plays a huge role in deciding what kind of education they get, the kind of home they live in, how they deal with challenges in real time and their overall welfare, chances of survival and social reckoning (Abalogu, & Azor, 2024). Students from rich families usually have better chance at success while students from poor homes tend to swim against the tide. They may have to share books, live in crowded rooms and skip meals to save money in order to get by. Glewwe (2010) contends that a family's socio-economic situation strongly affects how a student learns and performs. This is because when parents struggle to make ends meet, their children usually feel the pressure also. Many students in this situation in Nigeria may take part-time jobs or borrow

money to cover their expenses. While this, in some ways helps them survive, it also impacts on time and energy that could have been spent studying. For example, a student who works at night may feel too tired to pay attention during lectures the next day, also a student who borrows money to cover expenses might feel uncomfortable when the creditor is around. Over time, these challenges reduce concentration and motivation, making it harder to keep up with learning and schoolwork. This creates differences among students and shapes not only their education but also confidence level, social experience and learning outcomes (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2008).

How well a student survives depends on their resilience, emotional strength, level of intelligence, and the help they get from others. For many Nigerian students, survival is more than getting good grades; it is about finding food, paying rent, staying healthy, and managing stress (Omo-okperaboh, 2025). Ability to cope is key to students' survival in an economically hostile environment. This suggest being able to stay in school and complete one's studies despite obvious difficulties. It involves how students adjust to university life and deploy coping technique to improve their chances. When supports are unavailable, students usually deploy ingenious coping strategy such as taking menial/small jobs, trade merchandise, rely on friends, setup personal enterprise, go for weekend gigs to scavenge resources and sometime reach for extended family members for assistance (Omo-okperaboh, 2025). Some students adopt avoidance technique towards friends, classmates, or lecturers because of fear or a deep sense of shame, while others employ isolation technique to seek serenity and mental stability.

Many Nigerian students see welfare not just as a service but as an important part of education. Many students who suffer lack in Nigerian universities adopt methods that are either in consonant with the rules or deviate from the norms. Such methods often used by students who face lack include but no limited to:

Harnessing Social Capital: Students often depend on friends, family members, religious association or groups and community organizations for support and assistance. These social capitals provide sustenance, especially when school authorities or government aid come short.

Sharing and living together: Some students choose to live together and share personal effects in order to cut down expenses. This helps to reduce costs and builds friendship, though it breeds overcrowding, lack of privacy and unhealthy living conditions.

Getting help from institutions and NGOs: Many students apply for scholarships, bursaries and other form of aid programme from the school, government and non-governmental organizations.

Faith and perseverance: Religion plays an important role for many Nigerian students. Some recourse to prayer and expression of faith, or turn to religious communities to find motivation, solace and hope.

Risky survival choices: Sadly, some students take unsafe route to survive. These may include internet fraud, prostitution, joining cult group or armed robbery gang etcetera. These behaviours reveal how far students can go when in lack and how desperate they can act to achieve set objective.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The conflict and rational choice theory create ideal analytic framework that explains social conflict as a result of rational actors contending for limited resources. It focuses on critical disparity and competition that are confined within structural inequality, and provides the micro-foundations of cost-benefit-analysis of why individuals unavoidably participate in certain social exchanges. This perspective suggest that social institutions make rules (constraints) that incentivize or dis-incentivize individual's disposition to conflict and forces individuals to act strategically (choices) so as to favour themselves within that social structure. Dumbili (2014) suggests that the technicalities that surrounds the establishment, operation and functionality of the Nigerian universities as precepts upon good organization, predictability and control have since transmogrified into personalization, commercialization, and mystification of higher education and learning in Nigeria since 1980s. Regrettably, rules and regulations in Nigerian universities are insensitive and tend to have incompatible effects and outcomes. This dysfunctionality in Nigerian universities is ascribed to power and controls of resources that students depend on for their wellbeing. While certain service subsists in Nigerian universities, they are unfortunately established on unequal terms and principle that generate tension, competition and struggle among students. Students who find themselves caught in the maze of this contradiction and attempt to improve their prospect suffer setback since the system is besieged with various bottleneck of unbridled constraint which unsettles student in the Nigerian university.

Accordingly, Ibrahim and Sanni (2022) have observed that there is no perfect correlation between education/training and productivity because numerous social factors such as professional control, economic hardship, commercialisation, insecurity, gender, religion, culture, ideology and political-affiliation influence them. In Nigerian universities, extension of economic disadvantage narrows a student's chances and benefits. To achieve anything meaningful, students often compromise their position and differences as well as their unique identity. Such negates the objective of social development and encourages parochial patronage rather than systematic development of the human mind, thus making students in Nigerian universities purveyors of elite parochialism. This tacitly promotes not just oppression but a strategic economic exchange where individual student has to rationalize within certain social parameters the best way to maximize their position and get rewards.

In a constraint condition, students who are most times confronted with limited means, pursue personal interest, modifies operational rules and actions in order to gratify objective. This explains why student join demonstrations and protest-groups, take up menial or part time jobs, and worse yet; recourse to crime and clandestine means as a way to survive. For many Nigerian students this experiential exchange of an unequal social relationship in the learning environment is a continuous economic-conflict situation of cost-benefit-analysis. Based on this, students often treat institutional regulations as expectation laced with social norms that connects solidarity survival strategies. To ignore this for student will connote ignoring psychological welfare, emotions, rational impulse and the struggles that explain altruistic behaviour that provides means of survival.

3. Methodology and Materials

The study adopts a multi-stage sampling technique. It is a one-time mix method research that leans towards the conclusive design. It triangulates quantitative and qualitative approach to collect data because it was primarily conducted to investigate a research problem. The study area is Benin City which has a population size of 1.9 million people (Nigeria Population Commission, 2023). The study was conducted in two academic institutions within Benin City namely: The University of Benin (a public university) and the Benson Idahosa University (private university).

The combine population of students in both university is 64,999. A sample of 368 students was derived as

respondent using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula. This sample was drawn from the sampling frame that presupposes a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Though, this indicate that results could vary by marginal difference from the true population value, the technique is considered suitable for research in humanities because it balances precision with practical sample size constraints, and ensures reliable and generalizable findings without requiring an excessively large sample. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS ver.29) was used to analyze the quantitative data, Taguette was used to process qualitative data and Chi-square was adopted to test the study hypothesis.

The socio-demographics of the study indicate that male students who participated in the research form 61.1% while females are 39.9% and that they were drawn from across all levels and departments within the faculties in the university. The religious leaning of the respondents shows that 97.8% are of the Christian faith and the mean age is 21. This might be as a result of the rate of urbanization and social transformation sweeping through the socio-political and cultural landscape of the society which has find its way into the academic environment therefore informing the variation in the respondent’s entry age, religion and gender. Also, this could be because the rate of development and technology is shifting from the known to unknown, individuals and parents now embrace Western education and ideology that was hitherto not part of the cultural disposition of most persons.

4. Findings

Figure 1: Level of the Respondents

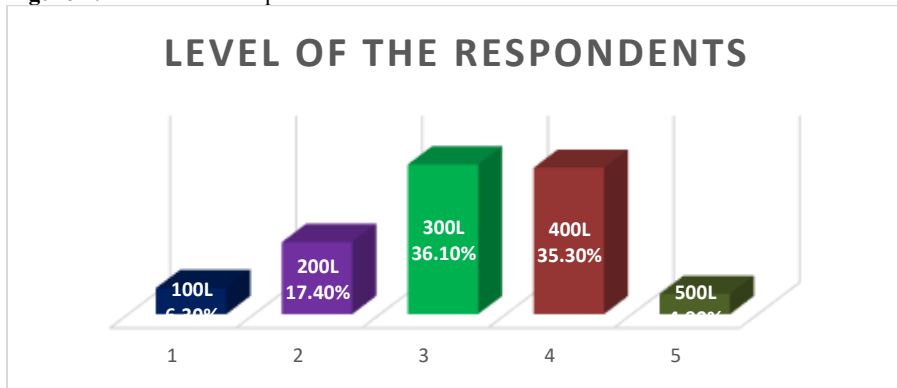


Table 1: Socio-economic constraints encountered by students (N=368)

Have you ever encountered constraints as a student?	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Yes	315	85.6
	No	53	14.4
	Total	368	100
What kind of constraints have you experienced as a university student?	Inability to pay tuition fees	105	31.3
	Inability to maintain consistent financial flow	188	51.1
	Inability to purchase course materials	12	03.3
	Inability to manage time effectively	25	6.6
	Social exclusion	28	7.8
	Total	368	100
How often do you experience constraints in meeting your socio-economic obligations as a student?	Very Often	120	32.6
	Often	110	29.6
	Sometimes	60	16.6
	Rarely	50	13.6
	Never	28	07.6
		Total	368

Source of Data: Field Survey by Longe & Iginomwanhia, 2025.

The data suggest that most students are conversant with constraints. This finding agrees with Longe and Omigie (2024) that constraints exist and contributes to student’s overall welfare in a negative way. What this means is that the socioeconomic hardship among many students in Nigerian universities is pervasive and that many of them are not insulated from it. The constraint faced by many university students in Nigeria is primarily financial in nature and it is

deeply widespread with far reaching social consequences. A majority of respondents (85.6%) reported experiencing financial difficulties at some point in their academic journey, while only 14.4% indicated encountering other form of constraints besides finance. Again, this finding corroborates Omo-okperaboh (2025) and Van Ewijk and Slegers (2010) that for most students, their experience usually is a challenge that bothers on socioeconomic difficulty. This might substantially be a result of differences in parental background of students. This overwhelming disparity underscores the prevalence of financial instability as a major concern within the student population. Of the challenges faced by students, financial inconsistency 51.1% and inability to pay tuition fees 31.1% appear most serious. Other social constraints also existed but are of lower concern; however not void of impact on student overall welfare. In examining how often students face constraints in meeting their obligations, 78.8% responded that quite often, there is some kind of challenge encountered in the process of meeting social and academic obligations.

To complement the quantitative data, the in-depth interview conducted revealed that respondents view constraints differently. Whereas some perceive it as a challenge with inherent limiting factors, some believe it is usually everyday-life experience. A respondent argued that:

...every one grow up with a form of constraint or the other in their homes or family. So why do you think that just because you are a student in the university constraint will suddenly seize to be. It is unreasonable to think that way. Just get use to it. it is part of life...and I devise a means to survive it (IDI: Male, 24 years, 400 level Student, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Benin, 2025).

Simply, put it feels like hell to be unable to get things done when you wanted it the most. It is both demoralizing and discouraging. It is best experienced than told, when you feel trapped in “wants and lacks” ... it makes you as a student to do what you do not want or intend to do and usually takes your attention off your studies... you hardly will be able to concentrate when you have needs calling in (Male, 21, 200 level, Faculty of Basic Medical Sciences, University of Benin, 2025)

Table 2: Survival and coping mechanism deployed by students (N=368)

Are these among the survival strategy deployed by student to mitigate against constraint?	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Are these among the survival strategy deployed by student to mitigate against constraint?	Apply for student loan and bursary scheme	151	41.0
	Pick up a part-time work	189	51.4
	Depend on extended family support system	19	05.2
	Drop out of school	9	2.4
	Total	368	100
Do you have any personal coping technique such as any of these?	Personal determination	162	44.0
	Sheer career prospect	58	15.8
	Desire for a better life	46	12.5
	Parental/Family encouragement	50	13.6
	Peer influence/societal perception	52	14.1
	Total	368	100

Source of data: Field Survey by Longe & Igbinomwanhia, 2025.

The data presented above offer critical insights into the extent to which social and material constraints influence students’ well-being and forces survival and coping technique to be deployed. With regard to survival strategy, the results show that most students learn the act of survival in school by adopting different approaches. To survive social constraints, most students take the option of working a part-time job. 51.4% of the respondents are captured in this category. 41.0% of the students believe applying for student’s loan and bursary will help cushion with the constraint. Others lean towards extended family support system while those who could not devise a means to survive chose to drop out. This attests to Glewwe (2010) submission that taking a par-time work is a major coping strategy for students’ survival. The social reckoning and texture within the university environment indicate that students’ social experiences vary and so is their survival intervention options (Abalogu, & Azor, 2024). The coping tendencies among students differ owing perhaps to their social affiliation, gender and or socioeconomic background. For instance, findings revealed that some proportion of students have developed coping mechanism such as personal determination to succeed as represented by 44.0%, peer influence 14.1%, career prospect 15.8%. Some draw strength from family and friends 13.6% and a desire for a better life 13.6%. Exploring the basis of these social adaptive mechanisms reveals a deeper and complex dynamics. Some students persevere the social and material conditions they find themselves in the light of the consciousness of societal perception. This also could be the reason 12.5% of the respondents alluded that the need for a better life spurs them on because the society often times attributes success not to what one goes through but what one is able to achieve.

Hypothesis test showing constraint induced anxiety among student

Do you experience anxiety as a result of socio-economic constraints?

	Observed O	Expected E	O-E	(O-E) ²	(O-E) ² /E
Very often	129	73.6	55.4	3069.16	41.87
Often	144	73.6	70.4	4956.16	67.61
Sometimes	55	73.6	-18.6	345.96	4.72
Rarely	12	73.6	-61.6	3784.56	51.63
Never	28	73.6	-45.6	2079.36	28.36
Total	368				193.54

$$\frac{\sum(O-E)^2}{E} = 193.54$$

Chi-square table

There is no significant relationship between anxiety and socio-economic constraints among students in Nigerian universities	
Chi square	193.54 ^a
Degree of freedom	9.48
Level of significance	0.001

0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 368.0

From the chi-square table, the calculated value of 193.54 and a degree of freedom which translate to a critical value of 9.48 as well as a significance level of 0.001 depict a result, and the result calculated value is higher than the critical value, hence the study reject the null hypothesis which state that there is no significant relationship between anxiety experienced by student and socio-economic constraints and accept the alternative hypothesis that state that there is a significant relationship between anxiety experienced by student in Nigerian universities and socio-economic constraints. This suggests that student experiences socio-economically induced anxiety. This result further underscores the view of Okioga (2013) that constraints experiences for students provokes psychological challenges which could cause poor academic performance, inability to focus, creates social isolation, stress and often result to low or damage self-esteem.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that socioeconomic constraints are a major barrier to students’ academic performance, personal development and overall wellbeing in Nigerian universities. Socio-economic factors (financial hardship) limit access to essential learning materials, healthy living, and emotional stability. It influences social relationships, leading to isolation and reduced participation in academic and extracurricular activities. While many students display resilience through coping strategies and optimism, their efforts are often insufficient to overcome systemic barriers. The strong reliance on informal support and risky work further reflects the inadequacy of institutional provisions. Though, most Nigerian students continue to display remarkable pliability and adaptability, on the overall, without concerted financial support,

improved welfare services, and inclusive social structures, many students will continue to experience diminished academic outcomes and limited life chances. The study concludes that unless urgent steps are taken by government, university management, and other stakeholders to reduce the socio-economic (financial) pressure on students, the quality of higher education and the psychological wellbeing of future graduates will remain at risk. Addressing this social inequality is therefore not only an educational necessity but also a key social responsibility needing immediate effective response in the area of policy and practice.

6. Key Recommendations

In view of the findings from this study, the following recommendations have been proposed:

Government Social Intervention: The government at the federal, state and local level should strengthen student welfare scheme by making loan and bursary programmes flexible and accessibility to students. This intervention funds will serve as a means of sustenance that will enable student to effectively cope with socio-economic challenges consistent with learning at the tertiary level in Nigeria.

University Support Services: Nigerian universities should endeavour to establish and expand student welfare departments that will provide social support system such as financial-counseling, emergency funds, relief packages and food support programmes for indigent students as it was indicated in the findings that this was largely absent in many schools.

Scholarship, Exchange and Partnership Programs: Nigerian Universities should collaborate with

professional, non-governmental organization and alumni associations to sponsor prospective student by offering scholarships and grants to economically indigent/disadvantaged students. This may help reduce some of the challenges relating to funding issues found from the research.

Skill Acquisition and Work-study Opportunities: Universities should have working skill acquisition platform for students to learn practical skills and work part-time on campus so as to earn a decent living that does not interfere with their academic work.

Economic Reforms: Broader national economic policies should focus on reducing programme and social inventions that directly affect students' families and their ability to sponsor education. Future social structure and intervention programmes should explore a long-term investment agenda that will possibly ameliorate constraints on students' education outcomes and their transition into the workforce.

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