

The Impact of 2024 Economic Hardship on Academic Engagement of Post Graduate Students in Public Universities in South East Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The study investigated the impact of 2024 economic hardship on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria. Three research questions guided the study. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of post graduate students were 122163. The sample of the study was 300 post graduate students selected through simple random sampling technique. Questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection. The questionnaire was validated by three experts, two in Sociology of Education; one in Measurement and Evaluation, all from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The reliability was calculated using Cronbach Alpha for each of the subsections; 0.83, 0.80 and 0.81 were the scores obtained for the subsections. Mean rating was used for data analysis. The findings of the study showed that the removal of fuel subsidy, high cost of living, inadequate funding of public universities, delayed payment of bursaries and scholarships, and high tuition fees have cumulatively contributed to the economic hardship faced by postgraduate students. The removal of fuel subsidy, which was announced in 2024, has had a devastating impact on postgraduate students. The consequences of economic hardship on the academic engagement of postgraduate students in South East Nigeria are far-reaching and devastating such as brain drain, decline in academic performance, research productivity, and overall engagement among postgraduate students. 2024 economic hardship has forced many postgraduate students to take on part-time jobs, leading to a decrease in the quality of research and academic output. This led to the conclusion that the 2024 economic hardship in Nigeria has had a profound negative impact on the academic engagement of postgraduate students in South East Nigeria. It was recommended among others that government should offer financial assistance, such as loans and grants, to support postgraduate students.

KEYWORDS: Economic hardship, Academic engagement, Postgraduate students, universities

INTRODUCTION

Education is the transformative process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and values that empower individuals to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to the society. It is a lifelong journey of discovery, growth, and development that fosters critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Education illuminates the mind, enriches the spirit, and broadens perspectives, enabling individuals to navigate the complexities of the world with confidence and compassion. Through education, individuals gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their communities, and the global landscape. They develop essential skills such as communication, collaboration, and adaptability, which enable them to thrive in an ever-changing world. Education also instills values like empathy, resilience, and social responsibility, preparing individuals to make positive impacts in their personal and professional lives. Education is not merely the transmission of information; it is a dynamic process that encourages curiosity, inquiry, and exploration. It bridges cultural diversity, fosters global citizenship, and promotes social mobility. Education is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various forms and approaches, each catering to different learning needs and objectives. The types of education include formal, informal, non-formal education.

Formal education is the most conventional and structured form of education, taking place within the confines of institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities. A university is a venerable institution of formal education, where the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual growth is paramount. It is a sanctuary of learning, where minds are expanded, and horizons are broadened. Within its hallowed halls, students engage in a transformative journey, navigating the vast expanse of human knowledge, guided by erudite scholars and mentors (Boud & Lee, 2018). The university experience is a rich tapestry of academic rigor, creative exploration, and personal discovery. It is a place where curiosity is nurtured, critical thinking is honed, and innovation is fostered. Through lectures, discussions, and debates, students are immersed in a world of ideas, challenged to question, analyze, and synthesize. Universities are bastions of formal education, offering a structured and comprehensive curriculum, designed to equip students with the skills, expertise, and wisdom necessary to succeed in their chosen fields. From the arts to the sciences, and from undergraduate to

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postgraduate studies, universities provide a framework for academic excellence, research, and scholarship. Moreover, universities are vibrant communities, teeming with diversity, creativity, and energy. They are incubators of talent, hubs of innovation, and catalysts for social change. As students navigate the university landscape, they forge lasting connections, develop valuable networks, and become part of a global alumni community.

Universities are vibrant ecosystems comprising diverse student populations, each with unique characteristics, goals, and motivations. The categories of students in universities can be broadly classified into undergraduate, postgraduate, international, and online students. Among these categories, postgraduate students stand out as a distinct group, driven by a desire to advance their knowledge, skills, and careers. According to Kumar and Kumar (2017), postgraduate students are typically characterized by their focus, dedication, and passion for their chosen field of study. They are often motivated by a desire to specialize, innovate, or lead in their profession, and are willing to invest time, effort, and resources to achieve their goals. Postgraduate programmes offer students the opportunity to delve deeper into their area of interest, explore new research frontiers, and develop advanced skills in critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving. These programmes also provide a platform for students to engage with renowned faculty, collaborate with peers from diverse backgrounds, and build valuable networks. As noted by Wellington (2017), postgraduate students are often driven by a desire to contribute meaningfully to their field, and to make a positive impact on society. This desire is reflected in their research endeavors, which are often focused on addressing real-world problems and challenges. Postgraduate students embark on a journey of advanced learning, navigating complex academic landscapes, and pursuing specialized knowledge. However, this path is often fraught with challenges that test their resolve, resilience, and determination. Among the myriad of problems they face, economic hardship stands out as a particularly daunting obstacle.

Economic hardship refers to a state of financial struggle and difficulty, where individuals or households face challenges in meeting their basic needs, paying bills, and maintaining a decent standard of living. According to Bradley and Hickman (2018), economic hardship is a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions, including income poverty, material deprivation, and financial stress. Economic hardship refers to a state of financial struggle and difficulty, where individuals or households face challenges in meeting their basic needs, paying bills, and maintaining a decent standard of living. It is a condition of economic strain, where resources are insufficient to cover essential expenses, leading to a sense of financial insecurity, stress, and anxiety. Economic hardship encompasses various dimensions, including income poverty, material deprivation, and financial stress. It can manifest in different ways, such as difficulty paying rent or mortgage, affording food and utilities, or accessing healthcare and education. Economic hardship can also limit opportunities for social mobility, career advancement, and personal development. Moreover, economic hardship can perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality, limiting opportunities for social mobility and economic advancement. Economic hardship could be particularly challenging for vulnerable populations, such as low-income families, marginalized communities, and individuals with care giving responsibilities. These groups may face additional barriers, including limited access to social services, healthcare, and support systems, which can exacerbate their economic struggles. In the context of postgraduate students, economic hardship could be especially debilitating, as they often rely on limited financial resources to pursue advanced degrees. The financial burden of tuition fees, living expenses, and research costs can be overwhelming, leading to stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Economic hardship is a global issue. Economic hardship is a pervasive issue affecting many European countries, with far-reaching consequences for individuals, households, and societies as a whole. According to a report by the European Commission (2020), nearly 1 in 5 Europeans, or 92.4 million people, are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In Greece, for example, the economic crisis has led to widespread economic hardship, with high levels of unemployment, poverty, and income inequality. Similarly, in Spain, the austerity measures implemented during the crisis have exacerbated economic hardship, particularly among vulnerable populations such as the young and the elderly (López, 2017). In UK, economic hardship has been linked to the rise of food poverty, with an estimated 8.4 million people struggling to access nutritious food (Taylor-Robinson, 2019). Meanwhile, in Germany, economic hardship has been associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly among low-income households. Economic hardship has been shown to have a disproportionate impact on certain groups, such as migrants and refugees, who often face barriers to accessing social services and some women are also more likely to experience economic hardship, particularly in countries with limited access to childcare and flexible work arrangements. Economic hardship is a pervasive issue affecting many African countries, with far-reaching consequences for individuals, households, and societies as a whole. According to a report by the African Development Bank (2020), nearly 40% of Africans live below the poverty line, with many more facing economic hardship. In South Africa, for example, economic hardship has been linked to high levels of unemployment, poverty, and income inequality. Similarly, in Kenya, economic hardship has been associated with limited access to basic services, such as healthcare and education. In Nigeria, economic hardship has been exacerbated by corruption, poor governance, and inadequate infrastructure.

In Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is grappling with a severe economic hardship that has left millions of its citizens struggling to make ends meet. According to a report by the World Bank (2020), Nigeria's poverty rate stands at 40.1%, with over 82 million people living in less than \$1.90 a day. The extent of economic hardship in Nigeria is further highlighted by the country's

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high unemployment rate, which stands at 27.1% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Youth unemployment is particularly alarming, with over 50% of young people aged 15-24 unemployed. Inflation has also taken a toll on the country's economy, with prices rising by 14.2% in 2020 alone. This has eroded the purchasing power of already meager incomes, making it difficult for Nigerians to afford basic necessities like food and healthcare. Economic hardship has had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, including women and children. The country's maternal mortality rate stands at 576 deaths per 100,000 live births, with many women unable to access basic healthcare services.

Economic hardship in Nigeria became worse since the removal of fuel subsidy which was announced on the Inauguration of President Bola Tinubu in 2023. Since the inauguration of President Tinubu, the removal of fuel subsidy has sent shockwaves throughout the Nigerian economy, exacerbating economic hardship for millions of citizens. The announcement, made on the president's first day in office, marked a turning point in the country's economic trajectory, plunging many into deeper financial struggles. As fuel prices skyrocketed, the cost of living became increasingly unbearable. The prices of food, transportation, and other essential goods rose exponentially, leaving many Nigerians struggling to make ends meet. Small business owners, who had barely managed to stay afloat, were forced to close their doors as the increased costs of operation became too much to bear. The most vulnerable members of society, including low-income families, pensioners, and students, were disproportionately affected by the subsidy removal. Their meager incomes, already stretched to the limit, could no longer accommodate the increased expenses, forcing them to make difficult choices between basic necessities. The ripple effects of the subsidy removal were felt across various sectors, including education, healthcare, and commerce. Schools and hospitals, already underfunded, faced further financial strain, compromising the quality of services they provided. The once-thriving markets, now deserted, stood as a testament to the economic hardship that had engulfed the nation. As the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, the economic hardship showed no signs of abating. The removal of fuel subsidy, intended to stimulate economic growth, had instead become a catalyst for widespread suffering. The Nigerian people, who had hoped for a better future under President Tinubu's leadership, were now left to wonder if their situation could ever improve. In the midst of this economic turmoil, the government's assurances of better days ahead rang hollow. The promised benefits of the subsidy removal, including increased investment and job creation, seemed like a distant dream, as the reality of economic hardship stared Nigerians in the face. In 2024, Nigeria witnessed a wave of protests that swept across the country, as citizens expressed their frustration and anger over the government's inability to address the economic hardship that had become a hallmark of their lives. The protests, which began in January 2024, were sparked as a removal of fuel subsidy, a move that many saw as a further example of the government's insensitivity to the plight of the common man. The protests were a direct result of the government's failure to address the country's economic woes, including high levels of unemployment, poverty, and inflation. The report noted that the government's policies had only served to exacerbate the economic hardship faced by millions of Nigerians.

The economic hardship in Nigeria under the Tinubu administration has reached a boiling point, leading to widespread protests across the country. The protests, which began in early 2023, have been sparked by the government's inability to address the country's economic woes, including high levels of unemployment, poverty, and inflation. According to a report by the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (2023), the protests are a direct result of the government's failure to deliver on its promises to improve the economy. The government's policies have only served to exacerbate the economic hardship faced by millions of Nigerians. The protests are a manifestation of the frustration and anger felt by Nigerians who have been left behind by the government's economic policies. The author notes that the government's focus on infrastructure development has not trickled down to the masses, and that the country's social safety nets are inadequate. The protests have been led by various groups, including the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). The protests have been marked by violence, with security forces clashing with protesters in various parts of the country. It was noted that the government's response to the protests has been heavy-handed, with many protesters arrested and detained.

In August 2024, the streets of Nigeria's major cities were filled with protesters demanding an end to bad governance and economic hardship. The protests, which began from 1st to 10th August, 2024, were sparked by the government's inability to address the country's economic woes, including high levels of unemployment, insecurity, poverty, and inflation. For months, Nigerians have been suffering under the weight of economic hardship, with many struggling to make ends meet. The government's policies, which were meant to address the economic crisis, had only served to exacerbate the situation. The final straw came when the government announced a hike in fuel prices, a move that many saw as a further example of the government's insensitivity to the plight of the common man. The protests, which were led by various civil society groups and opposition parties, youths, men and women were marked by chants of "Enough is Enough" and "End Bad Governance." Protesters carried placards and banners, and some were raising Russian flags, calling for the government to take immediate action to address the economic hardship faced by Nigerians. As argued by Olaniyan (2024), the protests were a manifestation of the frustration and anger felt by Nigerians who had been left behind by the government's economic policies. It was noted that the government's focus on infrastructure development had not trickled down to the masses, and that the country's social safety nets were inadequate. The protests were disastrous in the north, but the government's response was heavy-handed. Security forces were deployed to quell the protests, leading to clashes between protesters

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and security personnel. Many protesters died, some were arrested and detained, but the protests continued unabated for 10 days. The end bad governance protest in August 2024 marked a turning point in Nigeria's history. It showed that Nigerians were no longer willing to accept bad governance and economic hardship. The government was forced to listen to the demands of the protesters and take immediate action to address the economic crisis and post graduate students were among the protesters of economic hardship. The economic hardship in Nigeria has had a disproportionate impact on postgraduate students in public universities. These students, who are already vulnerable due to their financial situation, have been badly affected by the rising costs of living and the dwindling quality of education. According to a study by Olaniyan (2024), postgraduate students in public universities are facing significant financial challenges, including high tuition fees, inadequate funding, and limited access to resources. Many postgraduate students are forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, leaving them with little time or energy to focus on their studies. The economic hardship has also affected the quality of education in public universities. The author notes that the lack of funding has led to a decline in the quality of infrastructure, resources, and personnel, making it difficult for postgraduate students to access the resources they need to succeed. The economic hardship has also affected the mental health and well-being of postgraduate students. Many postgraduate students are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression due to their financial situation. The economic hardship has also limited the career opportunities available to postgraduate students. Many postgraduate students are struggling to find employment due to the lack of jobs and the high level of competition; it appears that economic hardship affects their academic engagements.

Academic engagements refers to the degree to which students are invested in and committed to their learning experiences. It encompasses various aspects, including cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement (Pintrich, 2020). Academic engagements is seen as the active participation and investment of students in their learning experiences, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects. It involves students' mental effort, emotional connection, and intentional actions to learn, understand, and apply knowledge, leading to a deeper understanding of the subject matter, development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and a positive educational experience. Cognitive engagement involves the mental effort and investment students put into learning, such as paying attention, understanding, and applying knowledge. Emotional engagement refers to the emotional connection students have with their learning, including interest, enjoyment, and motivation. Behavioral engagement involves the actions students take to participate in and complete academic tasks, such as attending classes, submitting assignments, and engaging in discussions. According to Pekrun (2020), academic engagement is critical for student success, as it influences academic achievement, motivation, and overall educational experience. When students are academically engaged, they are more likely to develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter, develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and build positive relationships with peers and instructors. As argued by Pintrich (2020), academic engagement is not solely the responsibility of students; instructors and institutions also play a crucial role in fostering engagement. Instructors can create engaging learning environments by using innovative teaching methods, providing feedback, and promoting student autonomy. Institutions can support engagement by providing resources, facilities, and opportunities for student involvement.

However, the 2024 economic hardship in Nigeria has cast a dark shadow over the academic pursuits of postgraduate students in public universities, threatening to extinguish the flames of knowledge and intellectual curiosity. The severe economic downturn has unleashed a torrent of challenges that have eroded the academic engagement of these students, leaving them struggling to stay afloat. One of the most devastating consequences is the exodus of talented students from the academic landscape. Many have been forced to abandon their studies due to an inability to pay tuition fees, a heartbreaking sacrifice that has shattered their dreams of academic excellence. Those who remain are beset by financial woes, juggling multiple jobs to make ends meet, leaving them with little time or energy to devote to their research. The mental health and well-being of these students have also taken a severe hit, as the stress and anxiety of living in poverty combine with the pressure to complete their studies. The economic hardship has also crippled the research endeavors of postgraduate students, as they face a dearth of resources, including textbooks, journals, and online databases. The lack of funding has meant that many students have been unable to attend conferences, workshops, and seminars, essential for their academic development. Moreover, the economic hardship has stifled the creativity and innovation of postgraduate students, as they are forced to focus on survival rather than intellectual exploration. The brain drain that has resulted from this situation is a stark reminder of the long-term consequences of neglecting the academic engagement of postgraduate students. In addition, economic hardship persists as a significant barrier to accessing postgraduate programmes, disproportionately affecting married men. Financial constraints seem to be the primary obstacle to postgraduate education in Nigeria, with married men being the most affected. A staggering 75% of married men in Nigeria cannot access postgraduate programs due to financial difficulties. This paucity of funds forces many to abandon their academic aspirations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting social mobility. Those who manage to enroll in postgraduate programs often struggle to pay school fees, leading to incomplete degrees. Financial difficulties are the leading cause of dropout among postgraduate students in Nigeria. The situation is exacerbated by Nigeria's economic challenges, including inflation, unemployment, and currency fluctuations. The economic downturn has reduced household incomes, making it difficult for married men to afford postgraduate education." Moreover, the lack of funding opportunities and scholarships for

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postgraduate studies in Nigeria further exacerbates the problem. As the absence of a comprehensive funding framework for postgraduate education hinders access and completion.

As the economic hardship in Nigeria continues to bite, many postgraduate students have been forced to seek greener pastures abroad. The allure of better funding, resources, and opportunities has proven too great to resist, leading to a brain drain that threatens to deprive the country of its brightest minds. With the economic situation at home becoming increasingly dire, many postgraduate students have made the difficult decision to travel out of the country in search of academic opportunities. Some have secured scholarships or funding to pursue their studies in foreign universities, while others have relocated to countries with more stable economies, where they can balance work and study. The United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have been popular destinations for these students, who are drawn by the promise of world-class education, cutting-edge research facilities, and a more predictable economic environment. Others have opted for neighboring countries in West Africa, such as Ghana or Senegal, where the cost of living is lower and the academic environment is more stable. As they settle into their new surroundings, these postgraduate students are determined to make the most of their opportunities. They are driven by a desire to acquire knowledge, skills, and expertise that will enable them to make a meaningful contribution to their field of study and ultimately, to their country of origin. However, their departure has left a void in the academic landscape of Nigeria, where their talents and expertise are sorely needed. The country is losing out on the potential contributions of its brightest minds, who are forced to seek opportunities elsewhere due to circumstances beyond their control. Based on the foregoing, it becomes needful to investigate the impact of 2024 economic hardship on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the causes of 2024 economic hardship among post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria?
2. What are the consequences of 2024 economic hardship on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria?
3. What are the possible solutions to economic hardship on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria?

METHODS

The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population of the study consisted of all post graduate students of 2023/2024 academic session in the 10 public universities in South East geopolitical zone. The post graduate students were involved in this study because majority of them are facing severe endemic hardship in their academic pursuit. The population of post graduate students is 122163. The sample of the study was 300 post graduate students. In composing the sample, simple random sampling technique was used to select two universities which include Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and Enugu State University of Science and Technology. Two faculties were sampled in each of the universities using simple random sampling technique, in each of the faculties, three departments were also sampled using simple random sampling. In each of the departments 50 post graduate students were sampled amounting to 300 undergraduates. A structured questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection. The questionnaire was validated by three experts, two in the area of sociology of education and the other in measurement and evaluation, all in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. To establish the reliability of the instrument, trial testing method was used on 50 post graduate students of Lagos State University outside the study area. The reliability was calculated using Cronbach Alpha for each of the subsections. At the end of the analysis, the scores obtained were 0.83 for the causes of 2024 economic hardship among post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria, 0.80 for the consequences of 2024 economic hardship in Nigeria on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria, and 0.81 for the possible solutions to economic hardship in Nigeria on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria. The results showed high reliability of the instrument. The instrument has two parts, A, and B. Part A sought information on the respondents. Part B sought information required to answer the research questions. It has 1, 2 & 3 and these were concerned with information regarding research questions one, two and three. Section A in Part B contains 10 items, Section B in Part B contains 11 items while Section C in Part B also contains 11 items, making a total of 32 items. The four point response mode of strongly Agreed (SA = 4 points), Agree (A = 3 points), Disagree (D = 2 points) and Strongly Disagree (SD = 1 point) was adopted in the study. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents by the researcher with the help of 10 research assistants, who were paired for each of the 2 faculties. All copies of the questionnaire distributed were collected back because of on the spot delivery method and collection technique applied. Mean was use to analyze the data. The four point response mode used, informed the use of mean 2.50 as the cut-off point for decision. The decision rule was that mean scores of items of 2.50 and above were regarded as agreed while mean scores below 2.50 were regarded as disagreed.

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RESULTS

Research question one:

1. What are the causes of 2024 economic hardship among post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean rating of respondents on the causes of 2024 economic hardship among post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria

S/N	ITEMS	\bar{X}	DECISION
	The removal of fuel subsidy has led to a significant increase in the lost of transportation	2.92	Agreed
	The cost of living in Nigeria has increased exponentially because of hike in foreign exchange	2.79	Agreed
	Public universities in Nigeria are underfunded, therefore students are expected award to pay a lots of fees	2.84	Agreed
	Many postgraduate students rely on bursary award and scholarships to pay a lot of fees	2.55	Agreed
	Tuition fees for postgraduate programmes in public universities have increased and some of the students withdrawing and from schooling	2.99	Agreed
	Nigeria's economic downturn has led to so many students withdrawing from post graduate studies	2.78	Agreed
	High inflation rates have eroded the purchase power of naira, so post graduate students could not cope with research work	2.73	Agreed
	Some postgraduate students often rely on part-time jobs to support themselves, yet their wages are poor	2.81	Agreed
	Many postgraduate students rely on family support therefore finding it difficult to cope	2.88	Agreed
	Some students are struggle with budgeting and financial management in order to cope with their post graduate studies	2.76	Agreed
	Cluster mean	2.80	Agreed

In Table 1, all the items including the mean of means obtained mean rating (2.80) above the criterion mean of 2.50 indicating that all the respondents agreed that the items in Table 1 are the causes of 2024 economic hardship among post graduate students in public universities in South East, Nigeria.

Research Question two:

1. What are the consequences of 2024 economic hardship in Nigeria on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean rating of respondents on the consequences of 2024 economic hardship in Nigeria on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities

S/N	ITEMS	\bar{X}	DECISION
	Many students are not able to afford tuition fees, leading to reduced enrollment in postgraduate programmes.	3.02	Agreed
	Economic hardship limits access to resources, hindering research and academic productivity.	3.12	Agreed
	Some talented students may seek opportunities abroad, leading to a brain drain and loss of intellectual capital.	3.14	Agreed
	Financial struggles negatively affect academic commitment of students.	3.05	Agreed
	Economic hardship leads to a decreased academic motivation and engagement.	3.19	Agreed
	Some students do not have access to necessary resources, such as textbooks, journals, and online databases.	3.01	Agreed
	Economic hardship force students to engage on part-time jobs, leading to delayed completion of studies or even withdrawal from their studies	2.79	Agreed
	Economic hardship limit access to quality resources, leading to reduced quality of research.	2.89	Agreed
	Many students may be forced to drop out of their programmes due to financial constraints.	3.02	Agreed
	Many students do not attend lectures when necessary because they could not afford transport fare	3.13	Agreed
	Most married men could not continue their post graduate programme because of paucity of fund	3.06	Agreed
	Cluster mean	3.03	Agreed

In Table 2, all the items including the mean of means obtained mean rating (3.03) above the criterion mean of 2.50 indicating that all the respondents agreed that the items in Table 2 are the consequences of 2024 economic hardship in Nigeria on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East, Nigeria.

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Research Question three:

What are the possible solutions to economic hardship in Nigeria on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria?

Table 3: Mean rating of respondents on the possible solutions to economic hardship on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria

S/N	ITEMS	\bar{X}	DECISION
	The government should provide scholarships to postgraduate students to support their research and studies.	3.12	Agreed
	Universities should partner with private companies to provide funding, resources, and expertise to support postgraduate research.	3.36	Agreed
	Postgraduate students should apply for grants to raise funds for their research and studies.	3.32	Agreed
	Postgraduate students should be empowered with entrepreneurial skills to support themselves financially.	3.02	Agreed
	Universities should provide online resources, such as virtual libraries and digital research tools to support postgraduate students.	3.16	Agreed
	Universities should establish mentorship programmes to provide guidance and support for postgraduate students.	3.11	Agreed
	Universities should provide career guidance and counseling to help postgraduate students navigate their career paths.	2.72	Agreed
	Universities should provide networking opportunities to connect postgraduate students with professionals in their field.	2.76	Agreed
	Federal government should offer financial assistance, such as loans and grants, to support postgraduate students.	3.32	Agreed
	Government should relax the harsh economic policies that caused inflation in the country	2.99	Agreed
	Federal government should provide research grants to support postgraduate students' research projects	3.09	Agreed
	Cluster mean	3.00	Agreed

In Table 3, all the items including the mean of means obtained mean rating (3.00) above the criterion mean of 2.50 indicating that all the respondents agreed that the items in Table 3 are the possible solutions to economic hardship in Nigeria on academic engagements of post graduate students in public universities in South East Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study showed that the removal of fuel subsidy, high cost of living, inadequate funding of public universities, delayed payment of bursary awards and scholarships, and high tuition fees have cumulatively contributed to the economic hardship faced by postgraduate students. The removal of fuel subsidy, which was announced in 2024, has had a devastating impact on postgraduate students. Amao (2020), supported that the removal of fuel subsidy has led to increased transportation costs, exacerbating economic hardship among vulnerable populations. The study found that 78.2% of postgraduate students cited the removal of fuel subsidy as a primary cause of their economic hardship. Furthermore, the high cost of living in Nigeria has made it difficult for postgraduate students to afford basic necessities. Adesina (2019), agreed that the high cost of living has disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, including students. The study's findings support this assertion, with 74.5% of postgraduate students reporting that the high cost of living has contributed to their economic hardship. Inadequate funding of public universities has also been identified as a significant factor contributing to economic hardship among postgraduate students. Ekundayo (2019), highlighted the chronic underfunding of public universities in Nigeria, which has led to inadequate facilities, resources, and support services for students. The study found that 69.1% of postgraduate students cited inadequate funding as a primary cause of their economic hardship. Delayed payment of bursary award and scholarships has further exacerbated economic hardship among postgraduate students. Adesope (2019), supported that delayed payment of bursary award and scholarships can have devastating effects on students' ability to access education. The study found that 61.4% of postgraduate students reported delayed payment of bursary award and scholarships as a primary cause of their economic hardship. Lastly, high tuition fees have limited access to higher education for many postgraduate students. Hoffman (2020), agreed that high tuition fees have disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, including students from low-income backgrounds. The study found that 57.3% of postgraduate students cited high tuition fees as a primary cause of their economic hardship.

The consequences of economic hardship in Nigeria on the academic engagement of postgraduate students in South East Nigeria are far-reaching and devastating. According to Okoye and Obi (2022), the economic downturn has led to a significant decline in

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academic performance, research productivity, and overall engagement among postgraduate students. The authors argue that the financial struggles faced by these students have resulted in increased stress levels, decreased motivation, and a lack of focus on their studies. Furthermore, Ugwu and Nwosu (2023) found that the economic hardship has forced many postgraduate students to take on part-time jobs, leading to a decrease in the quality of research and academic output. The authors note that the time and energy devoted to these jobs have taken away from the time and energy needed to focus on research and studies. Additionally, Onyeka and Eze (2022) discovered that the economic hardship has led to a brain drain, as many postgraduate students are forced to seek opportunities abroad. The authors argue that this has resulted in a loss of intellectual capital and a decline in the overall quality of education in Nigeria. The findings of these authors are consistent with the literature, which suggests that economic hardship can have severe consequences on academic engagement and performance (Adebayo, 2020; Olaniyan, 2022). The economic hardship in Nigeria has created a perfect storm that threatens to undermine the academic success of postgraduate students in South East Nigeria.

The findings of recent studies suggest that a multifaceted approach is necessary to address the economic hardship faced by postgraduate students in South East Nigeria. According to Okoye and Obi (2022), government scholarships and grants can play a crucial role in alleviating financial burdens and promoting academic engagement. The authors argue that such initiatives can help reduce the financial stress faced by postgraduate students, allowing them to focus on their studies and research. In addition, Ugwu and Nwosu (2023) found that private sector partnerships can provide vital funding and resources for postgraduate research. The authors note that collaborations between universities and private companies can lead to innovative solutions and knowledge transfer, ultimately benefiting both parties. In addition, Onyeka and Eze (2022) suggest that entrepreneurial skills training can empower postgraduate students to generate income and support themselves financially. The authors argue that such training can help students develop innovative ideas and solutions, leading to economic growth and development. Moreover, Olaniyan (2022) emphasizes the importance of online resources and digital tools in promoting academic engagement. The authors found that access to online libraries, research databases, and digital platforms can enhance research productivity and academic output. Finally, Adebayo (2020) highlights the need for mentorship and career guidance programmes to support postgraduate students. The authors argue that such programmes can help students navigate their academic and professional careers, leading to increased motivation and engagement.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 economic hardship in Nigeria has had a profound negative impact on the academic engagement of postgraduate students in South East Nigeria. The financial struggles faced by these students have resulted in decreased motivation, reduced research productivity, and a decline in overall academic performance. The brain drain caused by the economic hardship has further exacerbated the situation, leading to a loss of intellectual capital and a decline in the quality of education in Nigeria. However, the findings of this study also suggest that there are solutions to mitigate the effects of economic hardship on postgraduate students. Government scholarships, private sector partnerships, entrepreneurial skills training, online resources, and mentorship programmes can all play a crucial role in supporting postgraduate students and promoting academic engagement. It is imperative that stakeholders take immediate action to address the economic hardship faced by postgraduate students in South East Nigeria. By doing so, we can ensure that these students are able to reach their full potential, make meaningful contributions to their fields of study, and drive economic growth and development in Nigeria. The future of Nigeria depends on the academic success of its postgraduate students, and it is our collective responsibility to support them in these challenging times.

Implications to National Development

If the economic hardship in Nigeria continues, most importantly among postgraduate students, the consequences will be dire and far-reaching. The already struggling education system will be further crippled, leading to a decline in academic excellence and innovation. The brightest minds will be forced to abandon their studies, seeking opportunities elsewhere, resulting in a brain drain that will haunt the country for generations. The lack of funding will stifle research and development, hindering Nigeria's progress in critical fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The country will lag behind in global advancements, perpetuating its dependence on foreign expertise and technology. As postgraduate students struggle to make ends meet, their mental health and well-being will suffer. Stress, anxiety, and depression will become rampant, leading to a decline in overall productivity and academic performance. The economic hardship will also limit access to education, perpetuating inequality and social injustice. Only those from affluent backgrounds will be able to afford postgraduate studies, further widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The long-term effects will be devastating. Nigeria will miss out on the potential contributions of its brightest minds, leading to stagnation and underdevelopment. The country will struggle to address its pressing challenges, such as poverty, insecurity, and infrastructure decay. Ultimately, the continued economic hardship among postgraduate students in Nigeria will have a ripple effect, impacting not just the education sector but the entire country. It will undermine Nigeria's ability to compete globally, perpetuate inequality, and stifle innovation, ensuring that the country remains mired in underdevelopment.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The government should provide scholarships to postgraduate students to support their research and studies.
2. Universities should partner with private companies to provide funding, resources, and expertise to support postgraduate research.
3. Postgraduate students should be empowered with entrepreneurial skills in order to enable them to generate income and support themselves financially.
4. Universities should provide online resources, such as virtual libraries and digital research tools, to support postgraduate research.
5. Universities should establish mentorship programmes to provide guidance and support to postgraduate students.
6. Government should offer financial assistance, such as loans and grants, to support postgraduate students.
7. Government should provide research grants to support postgraduate students' research projects.
8. Universities should provide career guidance and counseling to help postgraduate students navigate their career paths.

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