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Economic barriers of African students arriving in the Czech Republic⁴

Abstract

International students coming to the Czech Republic for education, experience, and potential future employment opportunities encounter a variety of challenges. While each student's experience is unique, shaped by personal background, financial situation, chosen university, and community support, specific challenges are common to most students.

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyse the economic and social barriers faced by African students, particularly those from Nigeria. To establish a strong theoretical foundation, the PRISMA–PICOT approach was applied, followed by a qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to validate or challenge the theoretical assumptions. The study focuses on two key phases of the international student experience: pre-arrival and post-arrival.

The findings indicate that the most significant barrier in the pre-arrival phase is the visa application process, which involves difficulties in securing embassy appointments and fulfilling complex administrative requirements. In the post-arrival phase, financial insecurity becomes a major obstacle, as many students struggle to cover both initial and ongoing living expenses. The

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combination of these barriers creates a substantial burden, making the transition process more challenging and stressful for African students studying in the Czech Republic.

Keywords: abroad, African, Czech Republic, international, students.

Ekonomiczne bariery przyjazdu afrykańskich studentów do Republiki Czeskiej

Abstrakt

Studenci zagraniczni przyjeżdżający do Czech w celu zdobycia wykształcenia, doświadczenia i potencjalnych możliwości zatrudnienia napotykają szereg wyzwań. Chociaż doświadczenia każdego studenta są wyjątkowe, kształtowane przez osobiste pochodzenie, sytuację finansową, wybraną uczelnię i wsparcie społeczności, specyficzne wyzwania są wspólne dla większości studentów.

Głównym celem niniejszego badania jest identyfikacja i analiza barier ekonomicznych i społecznych, z jakimi borykają się studenci z Afryki, a zwłaszcza z Nigerii. Aby zbudować solidne podstawy teoretyczne, zastosowano metodę PRISMA–PICOT, a następnie jakościowy projekt badawczy. Przeprowadzono półustrukturyzowane wywiady w celu weryfikacji lub zakwestionowania założeń teoretycznych. Badanie koncentruje się na dwóch kluczowych fazach doświadczenia studentów zagranicznych: przed przyjazdem i po przyjeździe.

Wyniki badań wskazują, że najważniejszą barierą w fazie przed przyjazdem jest proces ubiegania się o wizę, który wiąże się z trudnościami w uzyskaniu wizyt w ambasadzie i spełnieniu złożonych wymogów administracyjnych. W fazie po przyjeździe niepewność finansowa staje się główną przeszkodą, ponieważ wielu studentów ma trudności z pokryciem zarówno początkowych, jak i bieżących kosztów utrzymania. Połączenie tych barier stanowi poważne obciążenie, przez co proces adaptacji staje się trudniejszy i bardziej stresujący dla afrykańskich studentów studiujących w Czechach.

Słowa kluczowe: zagranica, afrykańscy, Republika Czeska, międzynarodowy, studenci.

JEL: F22, I23, J15, K37.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of African students pursuing higher education abroad has increased significantly. This trend is driven by a complex interplay of academic, professional, and socio-economic motivations, as students seek to improve educational quality, expand career opportunities, and foster personal development in international contexts. Countries across Europe, including the Czech Republic, have become attractive destinations due to their affordable education systems, relatively safe environments, and growing internationalization efforts.

Despite these advantages, African students – particularly those from Nigeria – face numerous challenges that shape both their decision-making processes and their experiences before and after arrival. These challenges are not merely

individual in nature but reflect broader institutional, economic, and structural barriers embedded within international education and migration systems.

AIM OF THE STUDY

This study aims to identify, analyse, and explain the key economic and social barriers faced by African students, particularly those from Nigeria, during both the pre-arrival and post-arrival phases of their higher education experience in the Czech Republic. By combining a systematic literature review based on the PRISMA–PICOT framework with qualitative evidence from semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to deepen understanding of how institutional, financial, and socio-cultural factors influence students' access to Czech higher education and their academic and social integration.

BENEFITS AND PERSPECTIVES OF STUDYING ABROAD

Many African students are increasingly motivated to study abroad due to a combination of academic, professional, and personal development goals. Access to quality education and research facilities is a significant driving factor (Magbondé, 2021), as many foreign institutions offer advanced curricula, cutting-edge laboratories, and internationally recognized faculty that may not be readily available in their home countries (Liu, Froese, Peltokorpi, Feng, 2024). Research on macroeconomic and institutional factors has shown that the quality of domestic educational institutions also significantly motivates students to pursue education abroad rather than study in their home country (Lovětínská, Vokoun, 2024).

Additionally, career opportunities associated with international degrees represent a strong incentive, as studying abroad often opens doors to global job markets, internships, and skill development that can significantly enhance future employability (Banda, Zungu, 2024; Okunola, Ikuomola, 2009; Johanson, Priode, 2023). Personal development also plays a key role (Di Michele, Tørris, Gunn, Johansen, 2024; Schneider, Grau, Ariaratnam, 2023), as living and studying in a different cultural environment fosters independence, adaptability, and a broader worldview (Azram, Hong, Ahmad, Sohail, 2024). Furthermore, international study provides valuable networking opportunities, allowing African students to build academic, professional, and cross-cultural relationships (Michno, Lozano-Alonso, 2024) that can support their long-term goals. Together, these motivations contribute to the growing trend of African students pursuing education abroad.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC, A COUNTRY OF CHOICE
FOR NIGERIAN STUDENTS

During the pre-arrival phase, Nigerian students face significant challenges with university admissions and visa procedures when seeking to study in the Czech Republic. Gaining admission often involves navigating guidelines on entrance requirements, document authentication, and language proficiency standards in Czech or English (Lovětínská, 2023).

Even after securing admission, the visa application process through the Czech Embassy in Abuja represents a major obstacle. Students commonly experience long waiting times for appointments, lengthy visa processing periods, and strict documentation requirements, including proof of sufficient financial resources and legalized academic records (Lovětínská, 2023). Moreover, the embassy's limited capacity to handle the growing volume of student applications leads to delays and uncertainty, potentially resulting in missed academic deadlines.

A student mode is a concept designed to facilitate the visa process for a specific group of students from third countries. Nigeria was among the selected countries until January 1, 2024. Following its removal from this list, obtaining an appointment at the embassy became even more difficult for applicants (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2025). These procedural hurdles not only cause stress and financial strain but also contribute to the broader perception that studying in the Czech Republic is difficult for Nigerian students to access.

After arriving in the Czech Republic, African students often face multiple challenges that affect their academic and personal experiences (Urban, Kallová, Avilés, Jang, Urban, 2025). One of the most significant is the language barrier (Tan et al., 2022), as Czech is the primary language used in daily life and many administrative processes. This makes it difficult for students without sufficient language proficiency to navigate essential services, socialize, or complete specific university procedures (Tajvar, Ahmadizadeh, Sajadi, Shaqura, 2024).

Financial difficulties also persist post-arrival, with living costs, unexpected fees, and limited access to part-time employment (Fichtnerova, Vackova, Nathan, 2022) or scholarships placing pressure on students, especially those from modest economic backgrounds. Cultural adaptation can also be a struggle, as differences in social norms, communication styles, and educational expectations may lead to feelings of isolation or misunderstanding (Alasmari, 2023; O'Dea, Stern, 2022). Cultural differences and language barriers further complicate social integration, making proactive engagement essential (Wijbenga et al., 2024). If left unaddressed, these barriers can significantly affect students' academic performance, mental well-being, and overall success in the host country.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We adopted the PRISMA-PICOT framework to establish the theoretical foundation of our study. Subsequently, we employed a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to examine and refine our theoretical assumptions. The overall study design integrates established theoretical concepts with standardized search strategies to ensure a comprehensive approach. Accordingly, the initial phase focused on outlining and grounding key theoretical concepts, which were then explored in greater depth through qualitative semi-structured interviews in the following phase.

The PRISMA research question was defined as follows: *What are the key economic and social barriers faced by African (particularly Nigerian) students before and after arriving in the Czech Republic for higher education?*

The primary objective of the case study was to conduct a comprehensive literature review of barriers using the PICOT approach in the Web of Science (WoS) database. Searches were conducted using keywords such as *African, students, Czech Republic*, and terms characterizing international students (*abroad, foreign, global*). However, when limiting the search to scholarly articles and literature reviews in the fields of economics and politics, a sufficient number of relevant publications specifically addressing the Czech context was not identified.

Initially, 224 results were found. After restricting the publication period to 2021–2025, 151 publications were excluded, leaving 73 records. Further limitation to articles only reduced the sample to 65. After narrowing the scope to education, educational research, and interdisciplinary social sciences, 25 results remained. Following screening based on titles and abstracts, the final number of articles was reduced to six. Given this limited number, the search was extended beyond the WoS database to identify additional relevant sources.

Students from Nigeria at the University of South Bohemia were approached for semi-structured interviews using the snowball sampling method, facilitated by the author's existing connections. Initially, students of both sexes and at different levels of study were approached. Nine interviews were conducted, comprising three women and six men. The interview focused on identifying general, economic, and socio-cultural barriers faced by African students who have chosen to study in the Czech Republic before and after their arrival. Nigerian students were selected because they represent the largest group of students from African countries in the Czech Republic, according to data from the Czech Statistical Office.

RESULTS

The research focused on two phases: pre-arrival and post-arrival. The results are presented accordingly.

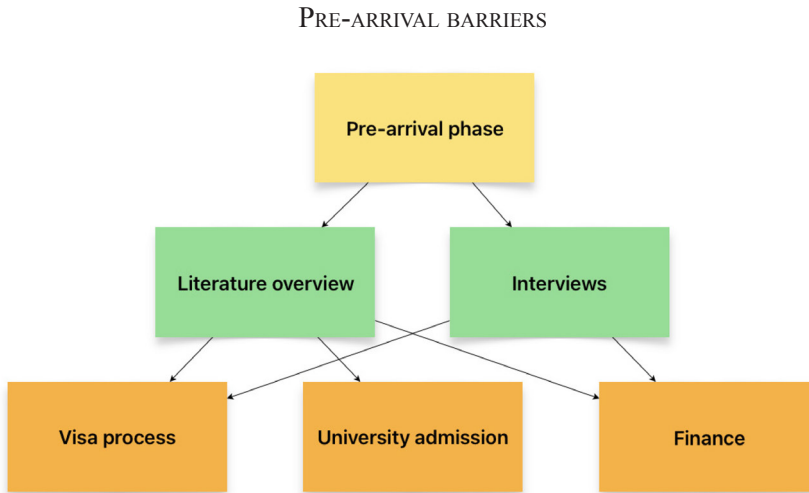


Figure 1. Pre-arrival barriers

Source: own research.

Interviews with Nigerian students confirmed that the visa process is widely perceived as the most significant pre-arrival barrier to studying in the Czech Republic. Many students described the process as time-consuming: *“It took time to get dates because you have to apply for dates for super legalization, you need to apply for dates for biometrics, you need to apply for dates for interviews.”* The process was also described as costly, particularly due to repeated travel and document legalization requirements: *“I had to take a flight three different times, and it was expensive because I had to go for like super legalization, then biometrics, then an interview, which was expensive.”*

A commonly cited issue was the difficulty in obtaining an appointment for a visa interview at the Czech Embassy in Abuja. Limited appointment slots and long waiting times frequently resulted in delays that jeopardized students’ ability to meet academic deadlines: *“I got my admission in July. I finished all the processes at the end of July, so I waited until August, September, and October. I finally received my interview dates for November, and then I obtained my visa in January of last year. Hence, it was like a six-month waiting period.”*

Students also emphasized that the cancellation of the student mode significantly worsened access to embassy appointments: *“It was faster before my turn, it was like six months, and now it’s harder for other people because lots of people are trying to come in.”* Another student compared the process to chance: *“It’s like something I would compare to a lottery. It’s like trying your luck.”*

Even after submitting all required documentation, uncertainty regarding the outcome remained high. Visa approvals are not guaranteed, and rejections are

sometimes issued without clear explanations. This unpredictability, combined with financial and emotional strain, makes the visa process a significant deterrent for prospective Nigerian students.

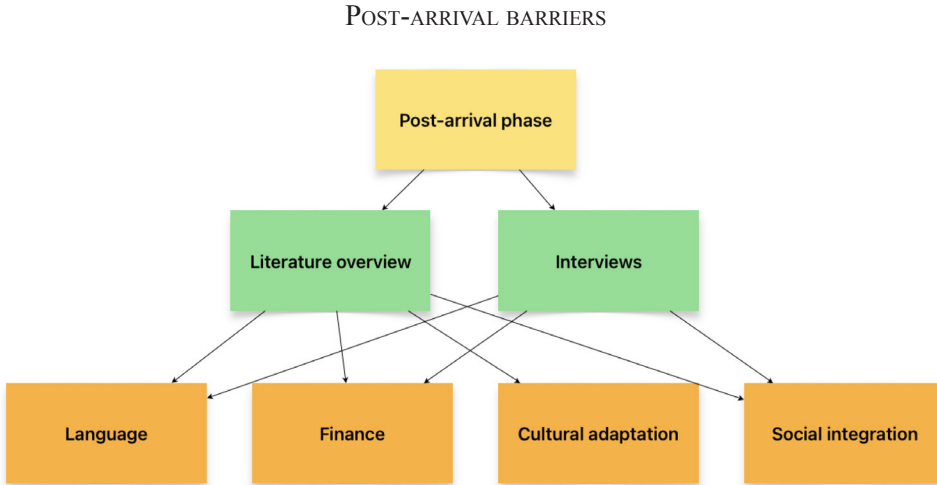


Figure 2. Post-arrival barriers

Source: own research.

Interviews revealed that financial constraints represent a significant economic barrier both upon arrival and throughout students’ academic trajectories if they are not sufficiently prepared. Upon arrival, students face substantial upfront expenses, including accommodation deposits, transportation costs, and basic living necessities: *“I was prepared for five to six months for accommodation and maybe a little bit of feeding as well. But I knew that as soon as I arrived, I needed to start looking for a job.”*

These costs follow already significant expenditures related to tuition, visa processing, and document legalization, placing considerable strain on students and their families: *“My parents and my fiancée help me.”* These costs follow already significant expenditures related to tuition, visa processing, and document legalization, placing considerable strain on students and their families: *“Because it’s just like you have the intellectual, you know this job, but you can’t get the job because of the language.”*

The inability to communicate effectively in Czech restricts access to many local job markets, leaving students dependent on irregular or low-income work: *“It’s like a minimum wage, so it’s not life-changing, but it helps,”* if available at all. *“There are lots of job sites that I apply to. And I could see that I might stand a chance, but because I don’t speak the language.”* This ongoing financial

insecurity not only affects students' academic performance and well-being but also limits their social engagement and overall integration into Czech society. *"I'm having a financial issue, so I'll be able to have more food to care for my family."*

The language barrier also restricts social integration and access to support: *"Affects you mentally because you might be in a place where you need help and even if the person walking by might speak English you're just like scared to ask them because you don't know if they speak the English."* Without sufficient Czech language skills, students often struggle to form meaningful connections with local peers, participate in campus activities, or access social support systems: *"The language has prevented a whole lot of opportunities."* This isolation can hinder their sense of belonging and overall well-being: *"First few months it was a bit tough time for me because I didn't have any friends and I got to used to the life that you how do I say right you mind your business that's how we live here so it's not something that I'm used to I'm used to having people around me."* As a result, many students remain within small, familiar cultural circles, thereby reducing their opportunities to engage with the broader academic and local communities: *"We only have our group amongst the Africans, yeah, we're on WhatsApp, so that's all."*

This ongoing financial insecurity, compounded by social isolation, affects students' academic performance and mental health and restricts their long-term integration into Czech society. These findings highlight the structural and linguistic barriers that exacerbate the financial burdens faced by Nigerian students, both at the point of entry and during their stay, and underscore the need for more targeted institutional and policy-level support.

DISCUSSION

This paper examines the motivations, pre-arrival barriers (focusing on university admissions and visa processes), and post-arrival challenges (such as language, finances, and cultural integration) that Nigerian and other African students encounter when pursuing higher education in the Czech Republic. Drawing on interview data and policy analysis, the study highlights how these factors interact to shape the educational trajectories of African students, and identifies areas where targeted support and policy reform are urgently needed.

PRE-ARRIVAL PHASE: INSTITUTIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS

One of the most prominent barriers identified by international students is the visa application process. In line with previous findings (Lovětínská, 2023),

respondents reported significant delays, bureaucratic obstacles, and substantial financial burdens in securing appointments and meeting documentation requirements. A particularly striking example is the recent removal of Nigeria from the Czech Republic's "student mode" list. This policy shift has intensified difficulties for Nigerian applicants, rendering the visa process akin to a lottery. These challenges point to broader systemic issues within the Czech immigration framework, which appears ill-equipped to handle the growing interest from third-country nationals, particularly those from Africa.

Beyond these procedural difficulties, visa policy also functions as a strategic tool through which host countries can influence the number and origin of incoming students. As Liu (2024) observes, governments often use visa regulations to shape the demographic composition of their international student populations in line with national interests. Some countries adopt more flexible and inclusive policies to attract students from specific regions or academic backgrounds, offering streamlined application processes or post-study employment opportunities. In contrast, others impose stricter requirements to limit access for applicants from regions deemed less desirable, citing economic, political, or security-related concerns (Akhrorova, 2024; Poojary, Roy, 2024). In this way, visa policy serves not only as a logistical barrier but also as a selective mechanism that filters student mobility according to geopolitical and institutional priorities.

POST-ARRIVAL PHASE: FINANCIAL STRAIN AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Post-arrival, financial insecurity remains a significant burden. Students frequently arrive with minimal financial cushioning and face immediate expenses such as housing deposits, daily living costs, and transportation. Limited part-time job opportunities, combined with the pervasive language barrier, exacerbate these challenges. While the Czech Republic offers relatively affordable education compared to its Western European counterparts, living costs remain a significant issue, especially in cities where student jobs are scarce or require fluency in the Czech language.

Language emerged as a dual barrier, both economic and social. As Tan et al. (2022) and Tajvar, Ahmadzadeh, Sajadi, and Shaqura (2024) suggest, the inability to speak the local language not only limits job prospects but also impedes students' ability to navigate everyday systems and build meaningful relationships within the local community. This aligns with Wijbenga et al. (2024), who emphasize the need for proactive integration strategies for international students. Bacon (2002) recommends creating study materials or lessons for potential students to prepare them for what comes after arrival, and to make university or work life more attractive. Behind all this, we must keep students connected to their roots in their hometown. Lu, Tamayo-Verleene, Söderberg, Puffer, and Meschke

(2025) described the connection with language and how people can suffer during cultural and language changes. It should be essential knowledge we provide to help students adapt to a foreign country, making them wiser, smarter, and better prepared to study and work.

Additionally, cultural adjustment remains a subtle yet powerful factor affecting students' sense of belonging. Feelings of isolation, misunderstanding, and frustration stem from differing communication styles and social norms, echoing the findings of Alasmari (2023) and O'Dea, Stern (2022). The same opinion is held by numerous authors worldwide (Abdulai, Roosalu, Wagoner, 2021; Gong, Gao, Li, Lai, 2020; Lu, Tamayo-Verleene, Søderberg, Puffer, Meschke, 2024; Wawrosz, Jurásek, 2022). Bacon (2002) reveals that more than 20 years ago, research showed dramatic changes in language proficiency during the learning of different "rules" in other societies. Ward and Kennedy (1993) presented older results on socio-cultural adjustment, revealing mental deficits. Some levels of anxiety and depression will appear after the cultural shock disappears, and they are related to various feelings about the home cultural preferences remaining and the new cultural values in the new country. The same results are also presented in Gong, Gao, Li, and Lai (2020), a study that focuses on the challenges of cultural adaptation. The optional strategy to satisfy all students is to design a study program that prepares them to protect their cultural preferences, adapt to new situations, and, more importantly, maintain mental focus, health, and resilience.

The limited visibility of African students within the Czech social and academic landscape also contributes to a sense of marginalization, further complicating integration efforts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while the Czech Republic offers valuable academic opportunities that continue to attract African students, particularly from Nigeria, the reality of their experience is shaped by a range of barriers that extend across both pre-arrival and post-arrival phases. The findings highlight that although motivations such as access to quality education, career advancement, and personal growth drive students to study abroad, these aspirations are often challenged by bureaucratic visa processes, financial strain, language barriers, and difficulties in social integration. The removal of Nigeria from the student visa facilitation program has further complicated access to higher education in the Czech Republic for many prospective students. Post-arrival, persistent economic insecurity and limited integration support continue to affect students' well-being and academic performance. These issues highlight the need for more inclusive, student-centered policies that address the specific needs of non-EU international students. Greater institutional transparency, expanded

financial aid, targeted language support, and intercultural programming are essential steps toward creating an equitable and supportive environment for African students. Without such measures, the Czech Republic risks undermining its own goals of internationalization and academic excellence by failing to fully include and support one of its growing student populations.

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