

An Exploration of the Practices of Locational Flexibility in Developing Economies: Insights from the Nigerian Higher Education Sector

Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the practices of locational flexibility in the Nigerian higher education sector. It examines the realities of remotely organising and managing academics’ teaching and administrative workload, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – Relying on the interpretative paradigm, the dataset consists of semistructured interviews with 92 professionals in the Nigerian higher educational institution (HEI) sector drawn from private and public federal government-owned and regional (otherwise known as state government) tertiary institutions.

Findings – The study highlights the practices of locational flexibility across the Nigerian higher education sector. Therefore, it underscores the notions of locational flexibility from the perspective of Nigerian academics. It reveals a paucity in the range and usage of locational flexibility options across the Nigerian higher education sector, as well as the factors shaping its implementation and utilisation. Ultimately, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings reveal that locational flexibility is predominantly environmentally induced.

Originality/value – This study focused on a salient topic that explores the practices of locational flexibility, particularly in an underresearched context of developing economies, specifically Nigeria. Moreover, the study contributes to the scarce literature on locational flexibility. Additionally, unlike previous studies that are mostly preoccupied with the meaning of the concept and the importance of the practice to employees’ work-life balance, organisational flexibility, and overall operational performance, this study underpins the practices, utilisation and barriers to implementing locational flexibility.

Keywords: locational flexibility, higher education institutions, flexible working arrangements, Nigeria

Introduction

The Nigerian higher education sector is a well-regarded occupation with highly gifted academics who have been trained according to Western standards. However, the organisation and management of work structures and processes in this sector are notoriously bureaucratic and highly regimented, giving rise to growing concerns of academics experiencing work-life imbalance (Akanji *et al.*, 2020). Evidence from developed economies such as the UK, US, EU, Canada and some Asian countries (such as Japan and China) underscores how businesses have been rapidly adapting and adjusting to technologies that are instrumental to the practice of locational flexibility, which has resulted in significant improvement in their operational efficiency (Possenriede *et al.*, 2016; Vilhelmson and Thulin, 2016). The results of these changes have led to a transformation in work-life experiences, including improvements in academics' work productivity, as well as organisational productivity, performance, and profit. Broadly speaking, workplace flexibility encapsulates temporal, numerical, financial, and locational flexibility (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011). In other words, locational flexibility is a subset of workplace flexibility. Locational flexibility differs across organisations in different countries (Neirotti *et al.*, 2019).

There has been an increase in academic interest in locational flexibility issues over the past two decades (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011; Boell *et al.*, 2016); however, there are limited studies on the experience of this concept in the education sector. Moreover, while a large body of research on employment flexibility, especially in North America and Western Europe, has increased, less consideration has been given to the execution of similar studies in developing countries in Africa, where institutional systems and cultural values differ from those existing in the West. Therefore, exploring locational flexibility from the context of the education sector associated with adopting the practice in a developing economy's perspective is a clear departure from

previous studies that have engaged the concept predominantly from the realm of meaning (largely induced by Western culture) and various benefits associated with the practice.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the practices of locational flexibility in the Nigerian higher education sector. On this basis, this research examines the following questions: What are the experiences of locational flexibility and its practices in the Nigerian higher education sector? Are there any significant challenges to adopting or implementing locational flexibility within the Nigerian higher education sector? In other words, the focus of this study is to fill the research gap in the literature by contributing to the understanding of employment flexibility within Nigerian higher education institutions (HEIs). The authors' aim is that the findings hereof will contribute to the largely neglected subject of labour (locational) flexibility by assessing institutional and sociocultural nuances that negatively impact the quality of educational processes and output. This study includes a literature review, which captures the theoretical and empirical studies within the topical subject area. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology used in the study. Finally, the study findings and a discussion thereof are presented.

Conceptualising Locational Flexibility

Flexibility at work is categorised as either employer or employee flexibility (Koivisto and Rice, 2016). On the one hand, employer flexibility equates to the deliberate action of an organisation to offer its employees flexible work arrangements (FWAs) by making changes to working time, work location, and work activities to improve productivity as well as to ensure employee wellbeing (Kalleberg, 2009; Kossek and Thompson, 2016). On the other hand, employee flexibility refers to the uptake of FWAs that are available and suitable for an employee to improve their balance of work and life obligations (Ter Hoeven and van Zoonen, 2015). Kossek *et al.* (2014) suggest that workplace flexibility (WPF) facilitates the negotiation of personalised

work arrangements and provides solutions to organisational inefficiencies. Flexible working arrangements facilitate improved employee wellbeing, thereby stimulating higher productivity and reducing organisational costs (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011; Adekoya *et al.*, 2022). In a sense, it is an agreement between the employer and workers regarding the control and management of their work environment, time, processes, or techniques in achieving continuous organisational productivity, thereby minimising costs and maximising profit (Kossek *et al.* 2014; Bal and Jasen, 2016). There are several forms of flexible working practices, such as annualised hours, part-time work, job sharing, flexi-time, home working, compressed hours, and staggered hours (Kossek and Thompson, 2016).

The term locational flexibility can be traced to 1970, developed from the term ‘telecommuting’ (Nilles, 1988). The term has now taken on new meaning and significance (Yu *et al.*, 2019). However, the widespread usage of advanced computers and the Internet since the 2000s has further facilitated the implementation of telecommuting, enabling an individual to work remotely while maintaining contact with coworkers and the rest of the organisation with the aid of ICT (Holtgrewe, 2014). Consequently, several business models that support locational flexibility have emerged, such as activity-based workplaces, coworking spaces, digital working hubs, and office clubs (Yu *et al.*, 2019).

Locational flexibility can be described as a situation where workers may be able to work remotely for some or all of their working hours (Bal and De Lange, 2015; Clarke and Holdsworth, 2017). Both Possenriede *et al.* (2016) and Yu *et al.* (2019) argue that locational flexibility is a mechanism that allows for work to be performed away from the traditional workplace by using mobile workers, outworkers, or teleworkers. The range and usage of locational flexibility is different across diverse contexts, depending on the personal flexibility and autonomy that it offers (Mulki *et al.*, 2009). It includes working from home, on the road, at a hub, or at the client’s site (Vartiainen and Hyrkkänen, 2010).

In recent years, people have advocated the necessity for remote working or teleworking, among other FWAs, to balance work and family roles (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011; Adisa *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, Vartiainen and Hyrkkänen (2010) argue that using technology-supported devices as a medium for maintaining communication between the employee and the employer can facilitate locational flexibility. In his seminal work on organisational flexibility, Atkinson (1984) mirrors locational flexibility as one within the second periphery clusters where remote workers are contingent workers segmented away from the core workforce. They offer employer cost savings by creating fewer workspaces while offering employees in the periphery segment options of remote working (Mordi, 2013; Felstead and Henseke, 2017). However, the theory has been criticised since the advancement of technology provides core employees with ICT tools for performing the primary aspects of their work through the use of digital working hubs that promote video conferencing, teleworking, and an on-demand workplace (Yu *et al.*, 2019).

The empirical organisational flexibility discourse highlights the benefits and costs of locational flexibility for both employers and employees. For instance, WPF debates in support of locational flexibility have been grounded in the assumption that it provides a greater level of autonomy to employees so that they may decide where their work is performed, which has some positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction and the reduced costs of commuting to work (Kossek and Thompson, 2016; CIPD, 2019). Similarly, Yu *et al.* (2019) argue that locational flexibility promotes smart cities by enhancing business innovation and collaboration, reducing costs, increasing employee satisfaction, and promoting a safe and less polluted environment.

Note that locational flexibility has also been seen to have adverse effects on flexible workers' productivity, such as work intensification and job insecurity (Kalleberg, 2009; Fogarty *et al.*, 2011; Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016). Bentley *et al.* (2016) found that many employees working from home may find it difficult to maintain concentration on their work, as family time demands could impinge on their work responsibilities and vice versa. This has become

more obvious in the wake of the current COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, where many professionals have had to work from home, unlike their traditional work mode (Koroma *et al.*, 2014). Papatheodorou (2015) suggests that locational flexibility can thwart work-family balance and engender work-life/family conflict due to blurring the border between work and personal/family lives. Moreover, the effectiveness of locational flexibility is backed by the use of digital-assisted technologies to facilitate communication between a remote worker and other members of his/her organisation (Boell *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, the adoption and practice of locational flexibility differ between developing and developed countries. For instance, in a recent research ranking how 30 countries (including Nigeria) adapt to remote work, Bana *et al.* (2021) found that developed countries adapted more easily to remote work than their counterparts in developing countries based on three key factors, including internet quality, experience working from home, and demographics. Their findings suggest that developed countries (e.g., Luxembourg, Sweden, Netherlands, Canada, and Belgium) have higher internet penetration rates, better occupational mix due to having high proportions of scientists, engineers, and business and administration professionals, better social policies supporting labour flexibility, and a higher proportion of the labour force with experience working from home. In contrast, developing countries (e.g., Pakistan, China, Brazil and Nigeria) performed worse in the rankings; in fact, Nigeria ranked last of the 30 countries. Another intriguing conclusion from their study was that developing countries struggled to adjust to locational flexibility because of their high fertility rates and high proportion of homes with young children, which made it difficult to manage distractions when working from home (Bana *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, by considering the institutional and sociocultural factors in developing countries, this study deems it fit to further explore the practices of locational flexibility in Nigeria.

Study Context

Nigeria is a sub-Saharan West African country with a population of over 200 million people and the largest economy in Africa, with a labour market of approximately 60 million people. The estimated rate of unemployment is 23.1% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The education sector is one of the most prominent sectors in Nigeria. It comprises the primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions administered by the federal, state, and local governments. The sector is regulated by the Federal Ministry of Education, which is entrusted with the formulation and implementation of policies as well as quality control (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). Nigerian tertiary education is divided into universities, polytechnic institutions, and colleges of education. These divisions are further categorised into federal, state, and private institutions. There are 43 federal universities, 47 state universities, and 75 private universities; 33 federal, 91 state, and 64 private polytechnic institutions; and 22 federal, 47 state, and 20 private colleges of education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020).

Nigeria is faced with a myriad of infrastructural failures (Agbionu *et al.*, 2018). Hence, academics across Nigerian HEIs find it difficult to operate within a technologically challenged environment. This exacerbates our concerns regarding their experiences of locational flexibility, the extent to which it is practised and the challenges that hamper locational flexibility practices in Nigerian higher education institutions.

The sector is plagued by poor funding, mismanagement, incessant industrial strike actions, and dysfunctional and unethical practices, including inadequate implementation of budgetary allocations, leading to insufficient staffing and nonavailability of the most essential instructional materials (World Education Services [WES], 2017; IseOlorunkanmi *et al.*, 2021). There are approximately 16 million students in these Nigerian tertiary institutions (UNESCO, 2018). The poor teacher-to-student ratio due to the overcrowding of students in limited-

capacity classrooms remains one of the major challenges within the sector (WES, 2017). Furthermore, the management of work structures and processes in this sector is viewed as excessively bureaucratic and highly regimented (Omodero and Nwangwa, 2020) and undermines support for academics within the sector (IseOlorunkanmi *et al.*, 2021). Despite several restructuring measures over the years, the availability and usage of FWAs that permit locational flexibility across the sector mirrors the deteriorating rate of academics' wellbeing (Adekoya *et al.*, 2019; Akanji *et al.*, 2020).

Methodology

This study is guided by interpretivism, allowing researchers to discover rich narratives from individuals' lived experiences (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). This approach is used following the authors' interest in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the researched phenomenon by drawing inferences from the patterns that occur during the event (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Similar studies have also adopted this approach in Nigeria (Mordi *et al.*, 2013; Adisa *et al.*, 2019). A case study design was used in this study to provide an opportunity to explore the meanings, motivations, and implications of daily activities and life events. While a case study approach can provide sufficient qualitative data, generalisation of the results may be difficult. Nevertheless, case studies are essential in clarifying concepts and generating theories from data (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Insert Table 1 about here

Using the snowballing approach, which allows a researcher to use the initial study participants to recruit other participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), participants were solicited through referrals and personal contacts (emails and phone numbers). Participants were recruited from across the six geopolitical regions in Nigeria, including states such as Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Kwara, Abuja, Kano, Kaduna, Cross River, Enugu and Adamawa. Among the six geographical

regions, the South–West region was the most representative in our research since it has the highest number of state and private HEIs compared to other regions. This study interviewed 92 participants with academic or administrative responsibilities across Nigeria’s federal, state, and private tertiary institutions. By academics, we refer to participants with primary teaching roles, while participants such as vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, provosts, rectors, registrars, bursars, and departmental heads are referred to as administrative staff. The demographics of the recruited participants are presented in Table 1.

In fulfilment of the study’s confidentiality agreement, pseudonyms were used for the participants’ representation. They have been named according to their rank or position and their HEI division (i.e., federal, state, or private). Furthermore, the eligibility of each participant was based on the length of employment with their current employer (a minimum of one year), age (25 years old and older), and marital status (single, married, divorced, and separated). Semistructured interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted using electronic and audio devices and online media (telephone audio calls, WhatsApp calls, and Skype) according to the preferences of the interviewees. The data collection instrument was deemed fit as a result of the face-to-face restriction caused by the lockdown and self-isolation instructions from the Nigerian government. Consent forms were sent via email to the participants, and their employers’ consent was also sought. An open-ended questioning style was employed to allow for flexibility in discussing and exploring the participants’ views. For reliability purposes, the researchers were also able to arrange meetings through online and social media platforms to compare notes and ensure the coverage of all interview protocols in the pursuit of data dependability (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). Note that the study aims to explore the practices of locational flexibility in the Nigerian higher education sector. Saturation was attained after 78 participants were interviewed, given that no new information was added

that reinforced the findings of the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Nevertheless, 14 more interviews were conducted to substantiate the existing themes.

Data Analysis

Data transcription took place immediately after the interviews were conducted. Iteratively, the transcription and analysis of data were performed in a systematic, repetitive, and recurring manner while adopting the thematic analysis procedure (TAP). TAP involves the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following the three major steps of thematic analysis proposed by Pratt *et al.* (2006), the researchers first derived the first-order codes through provisional categorisation by using the open-coding method for data reduction. This was done by analysing transcribed text contexts and identifying phrases or words that recur and are significant to the research enquiry (see Table 2). A contact summary form, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), was used to record the provisional categories that were identified from the interview extracts at different points in time. This enabled us to identify the relevant issues and themes that resulted in additional questions. Upon completing name coding and categorisation, we carefully reviewed the interview data to eliminate any risk of omission or mismatching within the categories.

The theoretical categories were then generated by consolidating the first-order codes based on the interview data regarding the participants' concerns as they relate to their experiences of locational flexibility, organisational productivity, and wellbeing. In the final step, we attempted to establish theoretical explanations for the prevalence of the studied phenomenon. Key themes concerning the practices of locational flexibility in Nigerian HEIs unravelled. Cross-comparisons were undertaken, followed by the validation of conceptual categories, until a consensus on the main themes was attained.

Insert Table 2 about here

Findings

Notions of Locational Flexibility in the Nigerian Higher Education Sector

Locational flexibility is not a strange concept in the education sector, particularly among professionals in HEIs in the Western hemisphere (Kossek and Thompson, 2016; Bal and Jasen, 2016). In Nigeria, there is a general agreement that locational flexibility can be described as the ability to undertake work at home or in a particular location outside the traditional workplace. Some of the following quotations typify the shared views of the participants:

Locational flexibility is not strange in Nigeria, but it is not well pronounced within the education sector [...].

Locational flexibility is the ability of employees to work from anywhere while leveraging the available technological devices, regardless of one's geographical location (Lecturer II – State Polytechnic).

Locational flexibility is about not allowing whatever business activities you conduct to be restricted by location [...], especially with the aid of technology, which gives flexibility for work and increased productivity (Professor/Deputy Vice-Chancellor – Private University).

I think locational flexibility would be another term for remote working [...] it literally would suggest that people work in locations other than their main office (Lecturer III – State College of Education]

From the variety of responses, it is evident that locational flexibility is a known concept within the Nigerian education sector. In addition, the participants construe locational flexibility as an essential aspect of daily working, despite the inability to successfully disengage work from their fixed office location. The participants' conceptualisations of locational flexibility align with other studies (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011; Possenriede *et al.*, 2016) that suggest that locational flexibility is a mechanism that allows for work to be performed away from the traditional workplace.

Adoption of Locational Flexibility in the Nigerian Higher Education Sector

Predominantly, the range and scope of locational flexibility have been sparse among this group of professionals. Based on our findings, an overwhelming majority (87%) of the participants claimed that the locational flexibility options are limited in Nigerian HEIs and support only home working, while other forms of locational flexibility (such as digital working hubs and coworking spaces) are rarely used. The following responses exemplify the range and usage of locational flexibility:

Before the pandemic, there was nothing like locational flexibility in my institution, as all lectures were face-to-face. My faculty took the initiative of using the Zoom platform [...] (a lecturer in my faculty paid for this, not the university) in order for us to continue engaging the students in spite of the lockdown occasioned by the pandemic. [...] We started with the final-year students (Associate Professor – State University).

As a lecturer in a federal HEI, I can say that there is nothing like locational flexibility. There were no provisions to teach remotely, as our delivery has always been on a face-to-face basis, including management meetings (Professor – Federal University).

My teaching responsibilities are more hands-on and require delivering technical education [...] Therefore, in Nigeria, we don't have sophisticated technology, and working from home is impossible for my kind of job (Principal Lecturer – State Polytechnic).

We are a federal university, set up for distance and flexible learning. However, online platforms are mostly used for registration, tuition payments, and downloading lecture materials. Our exams are not conducted virtually but face-to-face. However, the online platform is not strong enough to support online delivery [...] – imagine having 2000 students registered for a course, and during the lecture delivery, only approximately 30 students are in attendance. This is because our technology is inadequate (Associate Professor/Head of Department – Federal University).

The above quotes are representative of the shared views that most tertiary institutions in Nigeria do not practice locational flexibility. The limited adoption of locational flexibility is common among these HEIs, regardless of their classification (universities, polytechnics, or colleges of education), as it is challenging for Nigerian tertiary institutions to encourage locational flexibility given the difficulties they face as a developing nation.

Generally, while some academic staff members in Nigerian HEIs undertake aspects of their administrative duties and research from home, teaching remotely with technological aid within and outside most tertiary institutions in Nigeria is significantly limited. According to Adejumo (2020), the availability of effective distance learning programmes to aid locational flexibility across Nigerian HEIs is scarce. Furthermore, despite the paucity in the usage of locational flexibility over the years, the majority of Nigerian HEIs practising locational flexibility are predominantly private institutions. Most state and federal HEIs do not practice remote teaching and research. This finding resonates with Agbionu *et al.*'s (2018) study, which suggests that private HEIs in Nigeria, based on commercial and profitability-related motives, are better innovators than state and federal HEIs.

Locational Flexibility: Reactionary or Environmentally Induced

The availability and usage of organisational flexible working arrangements across many Nigerian organisations are sparse (Mordi *et al.*, 2013; Ajonbadi, 2019). Based on this study's findings, a majority (88%) of the participants view the implementation of locational flexibility as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following extracts typify the participants' impression as to whether locational flexibility is used as a strategy or an environmental reaction in Nigerian HEIs:

As a relatively new private university, the pandemic is an eye-opener for us, and it has changed my perspective on the type of university we must run. Therefore, rather than concentrate on the conventional approach of teaching and learning, we have now included in our strategic plan that we are going to ensure the university is technologically driven [...]. It is an environmental reaction for us, and almost all federal and state universities in Nigeria, because I have worked with them. It is possible that the pandemic will force the management [teams] of the institutions to reconsider their positions and include locational flexibility as a policy in the [near] future (Professor/Vice-Chancellor – Private University).

Locational flexibility to me is an environmental reaction as informed by the pandemic. It could be said to be strategic for the private HEIs because theirs is for profit-making, and they cannot afford to be out of business (Rector, State Polytechnic).

For us, this pandemic has been challenging [...] You may have heard that our academic session is now on hold because we are unable to afford to attend physical classes and lack the necessary resources to do it online. This may be a disadvantage of being a third-tier HEI in Nigeria [...] (Provost, State College of Education).

Despite the limited evidence that portrays locational flexibility as a strategic approach in Nigerian HEIs, the majority of this evidence suggests that although locational flexibility is inherent in institutional policy, its implementation over time has been deficient prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Evidence from the HEIs' senior management/administrative staff (e.g., Vice-chancellors, Provosts, Rectors, and Faculty Deans) suggests that the drastic shift toward developing a locational flexibility policy and its implementation in the education sector emerged as a result of the environmental complexity and turbulence due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Factors Shaping the Implementation and Utilisation of Locational Flexibility

This study's findings show that there are profound factors shaping the implementation and utilisation of locational flexibility in Nigerian HEIs. A key factor affecting the implementation of locational flexibility is the attitude towards locational flexibility and its utility among academics and administrators. This attitude has been, at best, diverse. Most Nigerian academics appeared to be indifferent or neutral towards remote work. In contrast, the minority seemed to believe in its benefits, underscoring the need for Nigerian tertiary institutions to be like their counterparts in developed countries. This study found overwhelming evidence suggesting factors impeding the implementation and utilisation of locational flexibility in Nigerian HEIs. The following extracts are typical of all the participants' responses:

The government and management of the institution must be ready to fund the technology needed for effective remote working. We very much lack infrastructural facilities [...]. Additionally, the idea of lecturers having to use their money to buy internet data to teach or have meetings via Zoom or Microsoft Teams is absurd. Some of us doing so is based on the exigencies and the firm belief in the system that it must not collapse [...]. Can you actually imagine that even the institution's website is problematic and often frustrates both the lecturers and students? (Professor – State University).

Infrastructure constitutes a major impediment to the smooth implementation of working remotely. Currently, I am working from home, and I always have to power my generating set from 8 am till 6 pm, because I have lectures and meetings in between [...]. It is very annoying because the institution is not paying me for the fuel I burn every day [...] (Lecturer I – Private Polytechnic).

The erratic power supply, unresponsive university website, and lack of funds necessary for setting up adequate internet facilities are the main challenges facing the adoption of locational flexibility in Nigerian HEIs. This corroborates Bana *et al.*'s (2021) finding that the quality of the internet affects the adoption of remote work in developing countries. Additionally, we found that while the challenges hindering the adoption of locational flexibility are similar across universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, there are few distinctions based on work demands and culture. For instance, it appears that Nigerian universities, compared to polytechnics and colleges of education, place higher demands on their academics regarding their research activities. However, many lecturers can only access quality internet and the available database while on campus. In polytechnics, the requirement of hands-on teaching due to the technical nature of the courses taught without commensurate technology to facilitate online delivery makes locational flexibility more challenging. The colleges of education in Nigeria, regarded as teacher training colleges, are underfunded and rarely equipped with the tools necessary to carry out their duties off campus.

In addition to the poor infrastructure, the lethargic attitude of the organisational leadership serves as another crucial barrier recognised by the participants. More than half of the

participants alleged that the institutions' management failed to bolster employees' wellbeing. The participants raised their concerns about the lack of creative and innovative capabilities among the leadership to facilitate flexible working:

The creative capacity of our leadership is questionable. They are not creative and innovative enough, as they tend to focus more on the personal profits or money they will make from the project rather than delivering the service [...] (Professor – Federal University).

The major barrier in my view is the expertise of lecturers, [who require] training. A number of the lecturers are not IT savvy, even [in terms of connecting] to virtual management or staff meetings, much less having to cope with the technology to facilitate the effective online delivery of lectures [...] (Chief Lecturer – Federal Polytechnic).

One major barrier is the human factor. A number of professionals in the HEIs are not as flexible to adapt to new realities [...]. They become more resistant just because they do not want the status quo to change. Therefore, the buy-in of the people directly involved (lecturers) is essential to ensure success (ICT Departmental Head – State University).

The issue of trust and behavioural factors form another barrier [...]. For instance, my head of department keeps tabs on me just to check if I am actually doing any work. Therefore, I think our line managers will find it difficult to believe that employees who are supposed to be working remotely are actually working [...]. They are so used to seeing us at our desks or teaching in the classes (Senior Technologist – State Polytechnic).

Experiences of poor leadership culture, which is significantly influenced by corrupt practices in Nigerian HEIs, underpin some of the acute hindrances to implementing and utilising locational flexibility. This finding aligns with Akanji *et al.*'s (2020) argument about leadership style and organisational culture as key impediments to utilising locational flexibility and the growth of the Nigerian education sector. In addition, the lack of digital expertise associated with the use of technology impedes the use of locational flexibility (Bentley *et al.*, 2016; Wheatley, 2017). It is also noteworthy that in Nigeria, managerial control and presenteeism are deemed a significant impediment to implementing locational flexibility. In Nigeria, the

prevalent human resource management style is unitarist in its orientation and prefers a face-to-face management approach. To that extent, embracing locational flexibility as a strategic approach to managing workers is naturally not considered. This point corroborates Clarke and Holdsworth's (2017) argument, highlighting the challenges of managing the performance of flexible workers. Employers want to have their employees present in the central workplace for effective managerial supervision and control, which impedes flexible working practices. Similarly, Mulki *et al.* (2009) and Vilhelmson and Thulin (2016) asserted that organisations resist promoting remote working for fear of a drastic decline in organisational synergy, growing concerns regarding data security, and fear of loss of control over remote employees.

Finally, several participants made the point that the collectivist nature of Nigerian society, where kinship networks are vital because they enable people to rely on one another for everyday survival, has also impacted the adoption of locational flexibility. Some of the following quotations typify the shared views of the participants:

Another challenge is the sociocultural [reality]. Your neighbour or colleague could ask that their children stay with you when they return from school, thereby turning you into an emergency childminder all because they are aware that you are at home (Associate Professor – Private University).

[...] One must consider that the family structure we have in Nigeria may not support working remotely because, despite the high poverty rate in the country, we also have a high population, and parents want to give birth to as many children as possible without considering how they will cater to them (Principal Lecturer – State College of Education).

One of the challenges here is the proportion of students [who have] laptops or tablets [and are thereby able] to engage in remote teaching and learning. In fact, some of the students do not have Android phones [...]. The poverty in the economy is pervasive, and for most students in the state and federal institutions, who predominantly come from low-income families, such gadgets are [luxuries] to them. Most HEIs are ill-equipped with laptops and computers, as the available ones cannot serve [even] 5% of the student population.

Even as lecturers, the majority use their personal laptops because there are no provisions, except for departmental and faculty heads (Associate Professor/Faculty Dean – Federal University).

Similar to Bana *et al.*'s (2021) finding that country demographic factors affect their ability to adapt to remote work, our findings also revealed that Nigeria's demographic characteristics, such as high population, rise in the number of children living in households of low-income families and collectivist culture, affect the adoption of locational flexibility. It is clear that problems among students, particularly those who lack funds and access to good internet facilities and are exposed to the deplorable state of infrastructural and social amenities, formulate significant barriers to the implementation and utilisation of locational flexibility.

Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

This paper explores the extent to which locational flexibility policies and practices are a reality for employees in the Nigerian higher education sector. Specifically, the study explores the practices of locational flexibility in Nigerian HEIs. As a result, we also identified the factors shaping the implementation and utilisation of locational flexibility across Nigerian HEIs. Note that this study set out to contribute to understanding the concept of locational flexibility as one of the forms of organisational flexibility, which is grossly underresearched in Nigeria. Based on the realities of locational flexibility within the study context and with particular reference to the factors that hamper its implementation and utilisation across Nigerian HEIs, our study presents substantial theoretical and practical implications.

From the theoretical standpoint, the study findings are notable concerning the realities of locational flexibility in Nigeria HEIs. First, we contribute to the literature related to the concept of locational flexibility by highlighting the problems associated with its widespread applicability in the Nigerian context. This study points out that locational flexibility is a familiar concept across Nigerian HEIs. However, the phenomenon was made more pronounced

in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings reveal that the notions of locational flexibility across Nigerian HEIs substantially harmonise with the prevailing conceptualisations, where locational flexibility has been defined as a means of performing work-related duties outside of the traditional workplace (Hill *et al.*, 2008). This finding is consistent with previous research showing that locational flexibility facilitates employees' ability to choose from a range of flexible work arrangements that influence where work is performed (Possenriede *et al.*, 2016; Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Given the large body of research that has established the underlying factors facilitating locational flexibility (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011), employee autonomy remains the primary pillar supporting successful locational flexibility practices. This means that organisations must agree to allow (by providing flexible work options) and support their employees (through digital technologies) to implement schedules and structures that enable work to be performed outside of the physical office space.

Based on the conceptualisation of locational flexibility as previously explained, our findings point to the paucity of its adoption in Nigeria. Unlike Western countries, where locational flexibility is habitually practised, the practice of locational flexibility in Nigeria is sparse and grossly underutilised. Following the study of Andrade and Alden-Rivers (2019), the practices of locational flexibility in HEIs across the globe are facilitated through home working, distance learning, telecommuting, digital working hubs and coworking space. However, given the enormity of challenges faced by Nigerian academics in an environment that is technologically challenged, there is a limit to the practice of locational flexibility. Thus, locational flexibility in Nigerian HEIs is predominantly restricted to home-working, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, our finding is consistent with the studies of Agbionu *et al.* (2018) and Adejumo (2020), revealing that locational flexibility practices are not only scarce within Nigerian HEIs but also bedevilled by the institutional and sociocultural factors that hamper their usage. Beyond the need to promote employee autonomy, Nigerian HEIs lack the

latitude to practice locational flexibility due to the limited support and institutional failure to provide the necessary infrastructure and policies to foster locational flexibility practices.

In addition, Felstead and Henseke (2017) suggest that environmental uncertainty compels a transformation in an organisation's structures and procedures as a coping mechanism within the changing environment. Therefore, changes in the external environment (e.g., COVID-19) influence HEIs to react positively to locational flexibility. In a sense, it can be argued that the current clamour for locational flexibility or the pursuit of virtual flexible teams working in Nigerian HEIs has been an environmentally driven reaction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as opposed to a strategic choice made by the organisation's 'power-holders' (top management) in Nigerian HEIs. Therefore, it appears that the reactive environmental nature across Nigerian HEIs is due to compelling changes in social norms and expectations as influenced by the pandemic. Presumably, in addition to the education sector, several other sectors may also practice locational flexibility sporadically, further buttressing such practices as hinged on environmental determinism rather than being a strategic choice (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). This is in contrast to Western studies where locational flexibility is more prominent across HEIs, given that it is predominantly a strategic approach through the recent varieties of digital education strategies (Andrade and Alden-Rivers, 2019; Orr *et al.*, 2019). However, the pandemic has also made it contingent on increasing the effort for virtual learning and teaching.

As Howe (2012) suggests, an alternative way to decipher the causal explanation of the research phenomenon (e.g., the reason behind the farfetched reality of locational flexibility) is to understand the inner workings and factors leading to its limited adoption. In our reflection on the militating factors of locational flexibility implementation, we find that they are linked to several theories that may contribute to understanding the phenomenon. First, the resource-based view (RBV), as a framework that explores an organisation's internal competencies to gain competitive advantage through its internal resources and human capital (Ojala and Pyoria,

2018), is crucial for implementing locational flexibility. Nigerian HEIs' fundamental challenge is the inadequacy of the sophisticated infrastructure needed to facilitate locational flexibility. More importantly, the education sector (especially academics), as an example of the knowledge economy, requires ICTs to deliver services effectively. Note that knowledge workers (e.g., academics) are generally distinguished as nomadic or mobile workers recognised for their abilities to work in multiple locations (Koroma *et al.*, 2014). Hence, ICTs are crucial for facilitating locational-flexible work because promoting regular communication and easy access to information, especially for knowledge workers, eliminates geographical and organisational boundaries (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011).

Many institutions of higher learning in Nigeria have not invested the much-needed resources in ICT. Nigerian HEIs (especially government-owned institutions) depend mainly on annual budgetary allocations from the state and federal governments to facilitate their operations. In addition, UNESCO recommended a 26% budgetary allocation to education based on GNP, but the amount allocated to education by the Nigerian government has continued to be smaller. For example, Nigeria's budgetary allocation to education was 6.7% in 2020 and 7.05% in 2019, 7.04% in 2018, 7.4% in 2017 and 4% in 2016, whereas the average budget of an African country is estimated to be 16% of its budget allocation (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020). Furthermore, our findings suggest that the limited adoption of locational flexibility in Nigeria is better practised in private HEIs than in government (state and federal) HEIs. This is primarily due to the lack of investment in sophisticated technology across public organisations in Nigeria compared to private organisations. Our study resonates with some Western studies' experiences that emphasise the public sector's resilience to the traditional or classic model of public organisations, where the public sector remains dormant in implementing FWAs (Whyman *et al.*, 2015).

Furthermore, internal resources are also related to human capital possession, such as employees' knowledge, skills and attitudes. As Holtgrewe (2014) suggested, human capital and technical expertise are essential for teleworkers and may explain an organisation's adoption of locational flexibility. Therefore, the lack of expertise among Nigerian academics to effectively exploit the available virtual learning and teaching platforms inhibits the utilisation of locational flexibility. The current practice in a few Nigerian HEIs due to the unprecedented COVID-19 consequences has forced higher institutions to explore structural flexibility – adjusting their needs to adapt to economic and environmental fluctuations. However, this finding is central to the conclusions from Cegarra-Navarro and Martelo-Landroguez's (2020) study, which critiques the theory of the knowledge economy over its heavy dependence on knowledge production but neglects the dissemination and impact of knowledge as a crucial challenge for flexible work. Thus, without appropriate training regarding the usage of ICTs, academics may still struggle to use them even when available.

Institutional theory also explains the reason behind the farfetched reality of locational flexibility across Nigerian HEIs. Following the underlying principles of institutional theory that social norms, beliefs, culture and values influence organisational decision-making (Nordbäck *et al.*, 2017), our findings reveal that sociocultural values and attitudes impede the adoption of locational flexibility. This theoretical perspective mirrors the impact of management attitude and leadership attributes on adopting or implementing locational flexibility (Messerschmidt and Hinz, 2013). For instance, our findings suggest that managerial control and presenteeism impede the adoption of locational flexibility in Nigeria. The majority of Nigerian managers prefer seeing their employees in person. Generally, managers in Nigeria believe in presenteeism or surveillance and control by sight. They are sceptical as to the effectiveness of locational flexible working. This perception and posturing impede the adoption or effectiveness of locational flexibility practices (Clarke and Holdsworth, 2017; Webster and

Leung, 2017). The emphasis herein relates to most managers' bureaucratic nature that construes presenteeism as a standard practice (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011).

The loss of a manager's visibility and presence associated with employees working offsite despite the ad hoc but limited effectiveness to manage such situations persists as a growing challenge within the organisational flexibility debate (Fogarty *et al.*, 2011; Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Many Nigerian managers downplay the benefits from the freedom of working space (or flex-space), work methods and spatial mobility. Thus, employee autonomy is particularly crucial for the effectiveness of locational flexibility, which is lacking within the study context. Furthermore, leadership must reduce problems within the system to enhance efficiency. Problems ensue where the leadership fails to ensure judicious use of the financial resources given to them. Corruption as a culture, especially in Nigerian public HEIs, deters locational flexibility practices' adoption and effectiveness. It hinders leaders (top management) in HEIs from exhibiting innovative and creative abilities towards facilitating work flexibility (Akanji *et al.*, 2020).

From a practical perspective, this study identified several factors that inhibit the implementation and utilisation of locational flexibility in Nigerian HEIs. The study found that the lack of technical knowledge and expertise on the part of the professionals and service users (students) serves as a significant deterrent to utilising locational flexibility. Thus, human resources managers' importance in ensuring that employees are adequately trained by providing them with the necessary knowledge to utilise locational flexibility cannot be overemphasised. As Bentley *et al.* (2016) suggested, human resource managers are obligated to foster talent management by recruiting talented employees and training and retraining existing employees in preparation for the ever-changing business environment. Furthermore, this study's findings call for the effective governance and management of institutions, which must invest in technology-supported infrastructure within HEIs and across related sectors as a

mechanism for facilitating locational flexibility. It is also crucial for management teams to rethink the prevalent educational practices by shifting from a traditional to a digital-based educational system. It is advocated that locational flexibility should henceforth be considered from a strategic perspective rather than as a means of reacting to environmental circumstances. This is, however, also conditional on the managerial perspective of presenteeism and control. Locational flexibility should be regarded as a win-win situation in leader-followership exchanges rather than the authoritative and politicised governance culture inherent in Africa, which undermines organisational progress (Ajonbadi and Adekoya, 2019; Akanji *et al.*, 2020).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study highlights the problems facing HEIs in practising locational flexibility in Nigeria (a non-Western context), it also has some limitations, which could open up opportunities for future research. This study is limited to the education sector, specifically HEIs, and further research could explore other knowledge economy sectors and leverage cross-sectoral comparisons. Additionally, our study focuses on Nigeria as an underresearched context in sub-Saharan Africa. We suggest that future studies might consider several other developing countries. Future research may use a longitudinal design for larger representative samples to examine the impact of current locational flexibility on workers. It will also be intriguing to investigate the unions' perspective and offer a more thorough study of how the problems associated with students' limited access to technology devices can improve teaching and learning when locational flexibility is embraced. The experiences of locational flexibility among nonacademic and lower administrative staff (e.g., course/faculty administrators, library assistants, personal secretaries and office assistants) may be considered for future research, given that their work schedules are different.

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