

Migration of Nigerian Medical Students to Practice Abroad

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Abstract: Despite having one of the largest health stock of human resources in Africa, and producing an annual estimate of 2000 – 2300 medical graduates, Nigeria continues to experience the “brain drain” challenge as a result of many medical graduates seeking ‘greener pastures’ in developed nations overseas. The migration of Nigerian medical students to practice abroad has become an issue of concern in the health sector. Therefore, this study explores the factors influencing this migration, drawing on observation, and interviews with medical students, doctors, health consultants, and stakeholders. As discovered from the findings of this qualitative study, inadequate funding, poor remuneration, insecurity, limited residency opportunities, substandard infrastructure, and unfavorable work environments are the major reasons for the migration. Although, the Nigerian government has overtime, promised policy interventions, and also made some efforts to purchase training equipment, but these seem to be inadequate in comparison to the benefits offered by foreign health systems. Consultants and senior practitioners could not but admit to the fact the work condition of medical doctors have significantly deteriorated over the years; which they described as a ‘generational gap’. The study recommends that comprehensive reforms, including improved salaries, better infrastructure, enhanced security, and increased investment in medical education and health systems are required to reverse the trend. The study concludes that Nigerian medical students may be more willing to remain and contribute to national development rather than seeking greener pastures abroad if these challenges are addressed.

Keywords: Migration, Greener Pastures, Generational Gap, Brain Drain.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Each year, Nigeria approximately graduates 2,300 medical doctors. Nigeria has one of the largest health stocks of human resources in Africa (Nwariaku, 2010). As at 2005, Nigeria has 39,210 doctors and 124,659 nurses registered (Nwariaku, 2010). The number of registered medical doctors in Nigeria, according to the federal government statistics of 2018 has risen to 74,543 (This Day Live, 2020). The request for Certificate of Good Standing (a surrogate for migration) between 2005 and 2007 were 2,341, 2,989 and 3,567 respectively (Nwariaku, 2010). As at 2020, Nigerian medical students mostly migrated to USA (20% of them), UK (9%) and Ireland (5%) (Nwariaku, 2020).

Overtime, many students in Nigeria migrate to practice as medical doctors in other countries abroad. The writer of this report, at the office of the College Secretary, Lagos State University College of Medicine (LASUCOM) on March 30, 2021, observed when a final year medical student came to

submit an official letter to hasten the processing of his result for a scholarship abroad. The officer on duty then questioned him as to why most of them always prefer to travel abroad after graduation.

The student simply shrugged. From the personal observation of the writer, the student probably shrugged because he was not ready to discuss the several reasons why he is planning to leave Nigeria. The probability that such a student would return to practice in Nigeria after benefitting from such scholarship is very slim.

A lot of challenges such as; “inadequate funding, low remuneration, poor training and work environment, political and economic instability (Ravi Shankar, 2020)”, have contributed to the reason why the dream of every medical student in Nigeria is to leave after graduation so as to practice abroad. There is a failure and structural malfunction in the Nigerian Medical Education system, hence, the international migration of people (Massey et al 1993; Hagen

Zanker, 2008). The Medical Training Institution in Nigeria produce between 2000 to 3500 medical doctors each year and very large portion of these graduates do not want to stay in Nigeria to practice the profession (Labiran et al 2008, Omoluabi 2014, Daily Trust 2015).

The bone of contention remains to find out the challenges that is influencing the decision of medical students to migrate abroad to practice, what the government/health sector is doing about it and what senior doctors and health consultants have to say about it. Because mere words of mouth would not be enough evidence to ensure that there is a change, this feature report after examining all of these would purposely look into what can be done by the government/health sector to make sure that the perception of most medical students about practising in Nigeria becomes positive.

II. CHALLENGES FACED BY NIGERIAN MEDICAL STUDENTS THAT INFLUENCE THEM TO MIGRATE ABROAD TO PRACTICE

One of the challenges stated by Rafau (2020), is the poor pay in Nigeria. According to him, “an average nurse in Britain earns £15,000 close to \$22,900 dollars or €23,400 a year. Whereas, the best paid Nigerian nurses earn #300,000 per year (£1700, \$2500 & €2600), while most earn between #60,000 and #120,000.

After speaking with some medical students at Lagos State University College of Education (LASUCOM), a doctor at LASUCOM, a doctor at All Souls Hospital (private hospital), a Superintendent of Police and a concerned individual, a lot were gathered as some of the challenges faced by medical students in Nigeria that influence them to take the decision to migrate abroad to practice.

Fidelis Francis, a 300 Level Basic Medical Science Student of Physiology department (LASUCOM) identified some of the challenges as; poor pay for doctors, brain drain in medical schools, lack of infrastructures. He said, “the medical sector in Nigeria is faced with too many problems; lack of funding, poor co-ordination, so why would anyone stay?”. He said nothing can make him choose practising in Nigeria over practising abroad because according to him, the challenges paced by medical students and doctors in Nigeria are “numerous”.

Talking more about the challenge of brain drain in medical schools, Dejene Aredo (2020) said, “the brain drain is stalling the continent's development...It is a problem because there is a huge deficit of manpower in developing countries”.

A 300 level Basic Clinical Science Student from the department of Nursing, LASUCOM, Adebawale Oluwatamilore mentioned the challenges faced by medical students as, “ inadequate equipment, low wages/income for

doctors and shortage of staff in the university”. She declared that she has better chances to practice and study outside Nigeria but she would not mind changing her mind if better wages are paid and new technologies are infused.

According to Felix Francis, a 300 Level Basic Medical Science student from the department of Physiology, the challenges faced by medical doctors in Nigeria is a big discouragement for medical students to stay back to practice in Nigeria. He said, “poor pay is a major factor why for leaving, particularly for mid-career doctors who have families to support”.

He further said that many doctors leave immediately after graduation for many reasons; one of which is to pursue international residency training. He said, “most in this category usually do not return to the country. They prefer to work where their newly acquired skills can be put to better use...They fail to find jobs or space for residency training here in Nigeria and so never return home to practice after finding one abroad”.

Doctor A.O Adeyemi, the managing Director and Senior Doctor at All Souls Hospital sheds more light on these challenges. He said, “they are looking for greener pastures, better pay, where they would have job satisfaction, that is, a good and favourable working environment to practice the profession”. When asked on why he decided to practice in Nigeria after he graduated from medical school despite the challenges he mentioned, he said, “we are the old generation. It was not as bad as this then. We came out when it was still fair, when it was still acceptable. When we graduated, the pay was reasonable. We used to get a car loan as soon as we graduate. All these are not there again, so no incentives for the younger ones of today”.

However, he agreed that young doctors and medical students have prospect in Nigeria despite the challenges, he said, “...they have prospect in Nigeria. People fall sick in Nigeria and need to be treated. It is only that there are good prospects for those that are ready to endure and hope for a better tomorrow”.

A Superintendent of Police, SP Olayemi John also has quite a lot to say about the challenges faced by medical students to keep migrating. According to him, many of them travel for greener pastures. They want to work in a good environment that is very equipped and our government is not providing this for them. Also, they are not collecting fat salaries and their working condition here is not nice. He said, “...Before, immediately a university student graduates especially one that studies medicine, many company would want to employ such students. They would entice them with cars, houses so that they can agree to work with them but it is not like that anymore. Whereas, all these facilities are present in abroad. That is why they all want to go there”.

SP Olayemi also talked about the insecurity challenge that doctors and medical students are facing. According to him, medical students are not being properly secured. He said, “a lot of cases have been brought to our notice, I have been appointed to carry out several investigations about several medical students who have been way-layed and stabbed to death/killed via other means by hoodlums at their various medical schools, mostly when they are returning from their duty post at midnight. He told the brief story of a medical student in Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) who was stabbed around late 2019 by a pick-pocket when returning from an emergency surgery he went to assist senior doctors on. Speaking on the challenge of insecurity for medical doctors as well, he said, “Doctors find it difficult to attend to emergencies at midnight because of this same insecurity reason. The issue of insecurity rarely happens abroad”.

Naomi Simeon, a concerned individual had so much to say concerning why medical students decide to migrate abroad to practice. She complained about the health sector in Nigeria not being as strong as before. She said, “The need for the health sector to retain medical students has to do with their ability to provide facilities, equipment, good structures and incentives because these are the things they are using to attract Nigerian medical students in abroad”.

According to Naomi, it is not advisable to practice in Nigeria because more opportunities are in abroad. She said, “in abroad, they have all you need...starting a professional life here is a no no for me”. She however encouraged medical students and doctors who go abroad to try and come back to serve their mother land despite these challenges. She said, “you can practice in abroad and come back to establish something here”.

Naomi buttressed her point by citing an example of how her aunty who now practices medicine in abroad had to start all over again when she got there because the training she got in Nigeria was considered insufficient.

It can be deduced from the above that, the challenges faced by medical students are; inadequate funding, low remuneration, insecurity, poor training and work environment, political and economic instability among other numerous challenges. These challenges, according to the information gotten from several individuals, are the major reasons why medical students decide to migrate abroad to practice.

III. WHAT THE GOVERNMENT/HEALTH SECTOR IS DOING ABOUT THE MIGRATION OF NIGERIAN MEDICAL STUDENTS TO PRACTICE ABROAD

A doctor and a Lecturer in Lagos State University College of Medicine (LASUCOM), who claimed anonymous, pointed out the fact that government is really trying their best to make sure these students are well trained. She said, “you see, these are the challenges we face, we have been trying our best to make sure they are well trained. The Governor of Lagos State, Governor Babajide Sanwoolu just purchased some equipment to enhance their training”. She further stated that the students are well-trained and that is why they can practice anywhere in the world.

She expressed her frustration concerning the fact that these medical students still make the decision to migrate abroad to practice despite much effort put into training them to become qualified doctors.

On the contrary, a 300 level Basic Medical Science student at LASUCOM, Felix Francis disagrees with the fact that the government is or might be doing anything concerning these challenges. He said, “Nigeria has not been able to get on top of this problem because nothing has been tried”. According to Felix, “Nigeria was the only African country listed among the top 20 exporters of physicians in 2004 with a loss of 5,499 doctors and the government does not seem to be concerned”.

An article by Abiodun Raufu (2020), “Nigerian Health”, however, noted that the Nigerian Minister of Health, Professor Alphonsus Nwosu recently promised to do something. He said, “we shall definitely address the problem of doctors leaving in drives to take up jobs in Europe and North America”.

The Nigerian government instead of looking for solutions to these challenges faced by medical students are busy accusing the United Kingdom government of luring their health worker to come and practice in their country. Elaborating on how the UK government and other foreign government lure Nigerian health workers to come and practice abroad, the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) on July 16, 2020 released a statement that they intercepted 58 Nigerian doctors who attempted to travel abroad without Visa (Chukwuma Muanya & Wole Oyeade – The Guardian, 2020).

The statement by NIS included that many Nigerian health professionals are leaving because they have been promised eligible occupations in the United Kingdom's social care sector. Of a truth, the United Kingdom announced a new "Health and Care Visa" policy on July 15, 2020 to attract the best talents in Nigeria and other parts of the world. UK did this to boost her National Health Service (NHS) because of the outbreak of Covid 19. It is also worthy of note that over 4000 Nigerian doctors are already in the United Kingdom spread across 83 sub-specialities (Chukwuma Muanya & Wole Oyeade – The Guardian, 2020).

Apparently, the government of the United Kingdom already have plans on how to cater for these Nigerian doctors before they even decide to grant them Visas. This could be seen in the statement of the UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel on March 31 when she made it known that UK introduced the Health Care Visa so as to show gratitude to health workers from overseas (Chukwuma Muanya & Wole Oyeade – The Guardian, 2020).

Honestly, it would not be bad if the Nigerian government plan for these doctors and medical students too. This would refrain them from taking the decision to migrate abroad to practice. According to the statement of NIS, the situation is really bad and the government is obviously not doing enough. The NIS statement reflected how these doctors complained bitterly after they were sent away from the Nigerian Immigration Office because they had to Visa. They blamed the situation on the poor working condition and environment, low work satisfaction, rising cost of living, poor salaries and emoluments, lack of work opportunities and deduction from salaries (Chukwuma Muanya & Wole Oyeade – The Guardian, 2020). Some of them expressed frustrations concerning insecurity, crime, poor family life and poor education for their children.

IV. WHAT HEALTH CONSULTANTS HAD TO SAY CONCERNING THE MIGRATION OF MEDICAL STUDENTS TO PRACTICE ABROAD

A consultant Paediatric Surgeon and Chief Medical Director (CMD) of Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), Idi Araba, Professor Chris Bode told "The Guardian" that health workers migrate because of four reasons. He said, "we do not have enough workers in a vital sector. We make huge investments to produce them but richer nation's simply harvest these workers free from our system. We seem powerless to stop the trend (Chukwuma Muanya & Wole Oyeade – The Guardian, 2020).

He further stated that there is an estimate of 72,000 registered doctors practicing abroad, coupled with the fact that medical students who freshly graduate always seek residency-training programmes hereby fleeing in droves (Chukwuma Muanya & Wole Oyeade – The Guardian, 2020).

The principal of the School of Nursing, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Mrs. Stella Ekpendu said that nothing can be done to correct this issue. She said, "the exodus of nurses, for example, from Nigeria to abroad, will not stop until the government addresses the issue of poor salary and the decay in the Nigerian health sector".

Foreign embassies in Nigeria get a weekly basis of 20 to 25 verification requests from Nigeria nurses wishing to migrate abroad; this means that 1196 nurses practically apply to migrate abroad per year (Raufu, 2020).

V. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

There is clearly shortage of health professionals in Nigeria because most of the health workers are choosing to migrate due to the challenges they face here. To reverse the brain drain, the Nigerian government should create a conducive environment that will ensure employment opportunities and reduce poverty. It must provide the needed infrastructure such as good roads and transport systems, affordable and functional education, water supply, security, stable energy in addition to good health care system.

There is a solution for everyone that is a part of the Nigerian health sector and they are as follow;

Government should provide the necessities for good work environment and subsidize rates of drugs tests. They should provide massive securities for medical doctors, medical students and other health workers. They should provide good remuneration and emoluments for medical worker, they should provide up to date facilities and equipment for the health sector.

The Health sector should provide necessary education to individuals that intend to migrate and enlighten them about the good they can do to Nigerian citizens if they stay back and practice here.

- The medical schools should provide necessary education.
- Medical doctors should improve in their skills.
- Medical student should learn from predecessors and do better.

Finally, the government and health sector should fix the hospitals and also provide reasonable remuneration. Everyone will definitely stay if all these are put in place.

In conclusion, many medical students will be willing to stay to serve their motherland if the situation were different. The government and health sector particularly should do better in making Nigeria a good working environment for Medical students, doctors and other health practitioners.

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APPENDIX 1

Interviewer: My name is Olagbende Rebecca Oluwabukunmi. I am currently doing my Masters Programme in Communication Studies at Lagos State University, Ojo Campus. I am writing a feature report on “Migration of Nigerian Medical Students Abroad To Practice” and I need your assistance to complete my findings. Kindly help me answer the subsequent questions. Can I meet you?

Interviewee: My name is Felix Francis, a student of LASUCOM, 300 level. Under the Faculty of Basic Medical Science, Department of Physiology.

Interviewer: Do you intend to stay back to practice in Nigeria after graduation/induction?

Interviewee: No

Interviewer: Why is that?

Interviewee: Well, doctors leave for a variety of reasons depending on where they are in their careers. For example, many leave immediately after graduation. They usually leave for one or two reasons. Firstly, to pursue international residency training. Most in this category usually don’t return to the country. They prefer to work where their newly acquired skills can be put to better use. The second reason is if they fail to find a job or space for residency training. Most in this category also never return home to practice.

Interviewer: Would you blame anyone who decides to practice abroad?

Interviewee: No

Interviewer: Why won’t you?

Interviewee: Nigeria hasn’t been able to get on top of the problem because nothing has been tried. The government doesn’t seem to be concerned. Nigeria was the only African country listed among the 20 top exporters of physicians in 2004, with a loss of 5 499 doctors up from 1 519 in 1991.

Interviewer: What can make you choose practising in Nigeria over practising abroad?

Interviewee: Nothing actually

Interviewer: What challenges do you think Nigerian Medical Doctors are facing that can influence them to migrate abroad to practice?

Interviewee: Poor pay is a major factor for leaving, particularly for mid-career doctors who have families to support.

Interviewer: What do you think the Government, Health sector, Medical schools, Medical doctors can do to prevent medical students from migrating to practice abroad after graduation/induction?

Interviewee: Clearly, the shortage of health professionals has no simple solution. The problem is global and therefore requires a global solution. The goal is to meet the legitimate labour needs of the developed countries without damaging the health systems of the developing countries.

Interviewer: That would be all, thank you very much

Interviewee: You are welcome

APPENDIX 2

Interviewer: My name is Olagbende Rebecca Oluwabukunmi. I am currently doing my Masters Programme in Communication Studies at Lagos State University, Ojo Campus. I am writing a feature report on “Migration of Nigerian Medical Students Abroad To Practice” and I need your assistance to complete my findings. Kindly help me answer the subsequent questions. Can I meet you?

Interviewee: My name is FRANCIS FIDELIS. A 300 level student of LASUCOM. Basic Medical Science Faculty. Department of Physiology

Interviewer: Do you intend to stay back to practice in Nigeria after graduation/induction?

Interviewee: No

Interviewer: Why don't you want to stay back?

Interviewee: The medical sector in Nigeria is beset with numerous challenges and problems

Interviewer: Would you blame anyone who decides to practice abroad?

Interviewee: No, I will not

Interviewer: Why won't you?

Interviewee: Like I said earlier, the medical sector in Nigeria is faced with too many problems; lack of funding, poor co-ordination, so why would any one stay?

Interviewer: What can make you choose practising in Nigeria over practising abroad?

Interviewee: Nothing

Interviewer: What challenges do you think Nigerian Medical Doctors are facing that can influence them to migrate abroad to practice?

Interviewee: 1. Poor pay, 2. Brain Drain, 3. Lack of infrastructure

Interviewer: What do you think the Government, Health sector, Medical schools, Medical doctors can do to prevent medical students from migrating to practice abroad after graduation/induction?

Interviewee: To reverse the brain drain, the Nigerian government should create a conducive environment that will ensure employment opportunities and reduce poverty. It must provide the needed infrastructure such as good roads and transport systems, affordable and functional education, water supply, security, stable energy in addition to good health care system.

Interviewer: Thank you very much

Interviewee: You are welcome

APPENDIX 3

Interviewer: My name is Olagbende Rebecca Oluwabukunmi. I am currently doing my Masters Programme in Communication Studies at Lagos State University, Ojo Campus. I am writing a feature report on “Migration of Nigerian Medical Students Abroad To Practice” and I need your assistance to complete my findings. Kindly help me answer the subsequent questions. Can I meet you?

Interviewee: My name is Adebawale Oluwatamilore. I am in 300 level, LASUCOM, Faculty of Basic Clinical Science, Department of Nursing

Interviewer: Do you intend to stay back to practice in Nigeria after graduation/induction?

Interviewee: No

Interviewer: Why will you not stay back to practice in Nigeria?

Interviewee: I have better chances to practice outside than here and also for studies

Interviewer: Would you blame anyone who decides to practice abroad?

Interviewee: No, I won't

Interviewer: Why?

Interviewee: It is a choice on whether to practice here or not

Interviewer: What can make you choose practising in Nigeria over practising abroad?

Interviewee: If the wages are way better and if new technologies are infused

Interviewer: What challenges do you think Nigerian Medical Doctors are facing that can influence them to migrate abroad to practice?

Interviewee: Inadequate equipment, Low wages or income and Shortage of staff

Interviewer: What do you think the Government, Health sector, Medical schools, Medical doctors can do to prevent medical students from migrating to practice abroad after graduation/induction?

Interviewee: Government: provide necessities for good work environment and subsidize rates of drugs tests etc, Health sector: provide necessary education to individuals that intend to migrate and ensure government policies are done, Medical schools: provide necessary education, Medical doctors: improve in their skills, Medical Student: learn from predecessors and do better.

Interviewer: Thank you very much

Interviewee: You are welcome

APPENDIX 4

Interviewer: Good day Sir, my name is Olagbende Rebecca Oluwabukunmi. I am currently doing my Masters Programme in Communication Studies at Lagos State University, Ojo Campus. I am writing a feature report on “Migration of Nigerian Medical Students Abroad To Practice” and I need your assistance to complete my findings. Kindly assist me in answering few questions. Can I meet you Sir?

Interviewee: I am Dr. A.O Adeyemi, MD and Senior Doctor and at All Souls Hospital.

Interviewer: What do you think is influencing the decision of medical students to migrate abroad to practice?

Interviewee: They are looking for greener pastures, better pay, where they would have job satisfaction, that is, a good and favourable working environment to practice their profession.

Interviewer: Do you believe that young doctors do not have prospect in Nigeria?

Interviewee: No, that is not true. They have prospect in Nigeria. People fall sick in Nigeria and need to be treated. It is only that

there are good prospects for those that are ready to endure and hope for a better tomorrow.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to practice in Nigeria?

Interviewee: We are the old generation. It was not as bad as this then. We came out when it was still fair, when it was still acceptable. When we graduated, the pay was reasonable. We used to get a car loan as soon as we graduate. All these are not there again, so no incentives for the younger ones of today.

Interviewer: What do you think the government can do to keep more medical students in Nigeria?

Interviewee: Fortunately, the training is still very good in Nigeria. They are well trained and that is why they can easily fit into any practice anywhere. The training is still up to date. It is only the facilities and remuneration when they graduate that discourages them so the government and health sector can fix the hospitals and also when the remuneration is reasonable, everyone will definitely stay.

Interviewer: Thank you very much Sir. That will be all...

Interviewee: You are welcome

APPENDIX 5

Interviewer: Good day Sir, my name is Olagbende Rebecca Oluwabukunmi. I am currently doing my Masters Programme in Communication Studies at Lagos State University, Ojo Campus. I am writing a feature report on "Migration of Nigerian Medical Students Abroad To Practice" and I need your assistance to complete my findings. Kindly assist me in answering few questions. Can I meet you Sir?

Interviewee: My name is Superintendent of Police, Olayemi John

Interviewer: What do you think is influencing the decision of medical students to migrate abroad to practice?

Interviewee: Many of them travel for greener pasture. They want to work in a good environment that is equipped and our government is not providing this for them. Also, they are not collecting fat salaries. Their working condition here is not nice. Before, immediately a university student graduates especially one that studies medicine, many company would want to employ such students. They would entice them with cars, houses so that they can agree to work with them but it is not like that anymore. Whereas, all these facilities are present in abroad. That is why they all want to go there.

Another reason is that our naira has been devalued. \$1.00 in USA is money here in Nigeria. So, when medical students get the opportunity to travel abroad, they believe that if they work over there they would earn dollars and would become millionaires by the time they get back to Nigeria. That is why they would prefer to stay back and practice in abroad.

Interviewer: In terms of security, which is where you are more concerned, do you think medical doctors and medical students are enjoying good security?

Interviewee: In terms of security, medical doctors are not enjoying much. A lot of cases have been brought to our notice, I have been appointed to carry out several investigations about several medical students who have been way-layed and stabbed/killed via other means by hoodlums at their various

medical schools. There was this case of a final year medical students in LUTH who was stabbed by a pick-pocket around late 2019. Doctors also, find it difficult to attend to emergencies at midnight because of this same insecurity reason. The issue of insecurity rarely happens abroad.

Interviewer: Thank you very much Sir. That will be all.

Interviewee: You are welcome

APPENDIX 6

Interviewer: Good day Miss, my name is Olagbende Rebecca Oluwabukunmi. I am currently doing my Masters Programme in Communication Studies at Lagos State University, Ojo Campus. I am writing a feature report on "Migration of Nigerian Medical Students Abroad To Practice" and I need your assistance to complete my findings. Kindly assist me in answering few questions. Can I meet you?

Interviewee: My name is Naomi Simeon

Interviewer: Would you advice a medical student to stay back in Nigeria to practice his or her profession?

Interviewee: It is not advisable, more opportunities are abroad.

Interviewer: Why?

Interviewee: They have all you need. You can practice in abroad for a while and come back to established something but starting my professional life here is a no no for me...

Interviewer: What do you think should be done to retain more medical students in Nigeria?

Interviewee: Health is not as strong as before. The need for them to retain people has to do with their ability to provide facilities, equipment, good structures and incentives because these are the things they are using to attract Nigerian Medical students in abroad....

Interviewer: Thank you very much

Interviewee: You are welcome