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Help, my Geography is dying: Understanding and reversing the decline of Geography education in public universities in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Declining enrolment in Geography programmes in Nigerian universities has become a growing concern, given the discipline's importance for spatial analysis, environmental management, and sustainable development. This study examines the factors driving this trend and identifies strategies for revitalizing Geography education within the Nigerian higher education system. A quantitative survey design was adopted, with data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 101 undergraduate Geography students from selected public universities in southwest Nigeria during the 2023–2024 academic session. Guided by a conceptual framework emphasizing career awareness, institutional learning experiences, and societal perceptions, the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings show that limited awareness of Geography-related career opportunities is the most significant factor influencing declining enrolment (37%), followed by competition from high-prestige disciplines such as engineering and medicine (26%) and negative societal perceptions of the discipline (22%). Institutional constraints, particularly limited fieldwork opportunities and financial barriers, further reduce student engagement. In addition, students' perceptions of Geography's relevance to the labour market remain mixed, reflecting uncertainty about its professional value. The study highlights the need for curriculum modernization through the integration of geospatial technologies, strengthened career awareness initiatives, enhanced industry–university



collaboration, and improved support for field-based learning. These findings provide empirical evidence to inform strategies aimed at repositioning Geography as a relevant and professionally oriented discipline in Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Curriculum reform, Enrolment decline, Geography education, Higher education, Sustainable development, Nigeria .

INTRODUCTION

Geography plays an essential role in linking society and environment through the study of spatial processes and human–environment interactions. Geography equips students with analytical tools for interpreting spatial data and managing natural resources effectively (Goodchild, 2018; Gunderson, 2024). However, its perception as a non-professional or less lucrative subject reduces its appeal to students making career decisions in contexts of economic uncertainty (Fraile-Jurado & Periañez-Cuevas, 2023; Imashev et al., 2025). Despite its significance for development planning and environmental sustainability, Geography education in Nigeria faces declining enrolment and waning interest among students. This trend is not unique to Nigeria but reflects broader global patterns where Geography struggles to maintain relevance amid competition from science and technology-oriented disciplines (Opoku, 2019; Neerunjun, 2022).

In Nigeria, Geography was once a prominent subject in secondary and tertiary institutions, but interest has declined sharply since the 1990s (Areola, 1994; Craggs & Neate, 2020). The decline in Geography education at the secondary school level has been influenced by several factors, including insufficient exposure, inadequate career guidance, and limited practical engagement, alongside the influence of more vocationally oriented fields such as engineering and computer science (Kariuki, 2022). These issues are exacerbated by recent curriculum reforms, such as those implemented by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), where Geography has been integrated into broader social studies and environmental science frameworks. This restructuring diminishes Geography's independent visibility at the senior secondary level, potentially reducing student exposure to the subject before university matriculation, thereby limiting early development of spatial thinking and discouraging enrolment in tertiary Geography programs (Yu et al., 2025). This scenario ultimately shrinks the pool of prospective Geography majors at university (Selmes et al., 2022).

These challenges are not unique to Nigeria but are mirrored across other African contexts. In South Africa, studies indicate that Geography enrolment has fluctuated due to curriculum restructuring and competition from science and technology disciplines (Pretorius, 2017; Golightly, 2025). In Kenya and Ghana, research has highlighted how weak career guidance and limited exposure to geospatial technologies reduce students' motivation to pursue Geography as a professional field (Opoku, 2019; Kariuki, 2022).

These similarities suggest that the Nigerian case forms part of a broader continental challenge in which Geography struggles to maintain its relevance within rapidly transforming educational and labour-market environments. For instance, a systematic review highlighted that the decline in student performance in external Geography examinations in Nigeria is a significant concern, attributed to issues such as poor map work, inadequate preparation, and insufficient explanation of concepts (Eze, 2021).

Globally, there is a compelling need to re-position Geography education through digital transformation, interdisciplinary integration, and enhanced societal engagement (Liu et al., 2022; Safriani et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2025). Thus, the future viability of the discipline of Geography critically depends on its capacity to link spatial literacy with employable geospatial skills and address sustainable development imperatives (Kariuki, 2022; Kriewaldt et al., 2025). Addressing these issues requires a strategic shift towards integrating advanced digital technologies, fostering interdisciplinary connections, and emphasizing the development of critical spatial thinking skills aligned with real-world societal and environmental challenges (Tabor et al., 2022; Lee, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Despite increasing scholarly attention to Geography education globally, empirical studies that specifically examine the drivers of declining Geography enrolment in Nigerian universities remain limited. Existing studies tend to focus on curriculum reforms, secondary school performance, or general educational challenges without systematically analyzing how students' perceptions of career prospects, societal attitudes toward the discipline, and institutional learning experiences interact to influence enrolment decisions. Consequently, there is a need for empirical research that examines these factors simultaneously in order to better understand the underlying causes of declining Geography enrolment and identify strategies capable of revitalizing the discipline within Nigerian higher education. Against this background, the present study examines the factors responsible for declining Geography enrolment in Nigerian universities and evaluates students' perceptions of the discipline's relevance within contemporary labour markets. It contributes to the growing body of research on Geography education by providing empirical evidence and practical insights for university administrators, curriculum developers, and education policymakers seeking to strengthen Geography programmes and enhance their relevance within contemporary higher education systems.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that explains how career awareness, institutional learning experiences, and societal perceptions influence students' decisions to enroll in Geography programmes. The framework draws from theories of career choice and professional identity formation, which emphasize that students tend to select academic disciplines that demonstrate clear professional pathways, visible employment opportunities, and strong societal relevance. When a discipline is perceived as lacking well-defined career prospects or professional identity, student interest and enrolment may decline. Research on Geography education has shown that students' academic

choices are strongly influenced by their understanding of career opportunities associated with a discipline and by the extent to which the subject is perceived to offer meaningful contributions to contemporary societal challenges (e.g. Kariuki, 2022; Kriewaldt et al., 2025).

The first dimension of the framework concerns career awareness. This refers to students' knowledge of the professional opportunities associated with Geography, particularly in emerging areas such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), environmental management, spatial data analysis, disaster risk management, and urban planning. Studies across African and global contexts suggest that students are more likely to pursue Geography when they are aware of its application in modern geospatial industries and environmental governance (Kariuki, 2022). Conversely, limited awareness of Geography-related career pathways may result in the perception that the discipline lacks clear professional prospects. The growing importance of geospatial technologies has significantly expanded the career potential of Geography graduates, particularly in areas such as digital mapping, environmental monitoring, and spatial decision-making (Lee, 2023). When Geography curricula effectively communicate these opportunities, the discipline becomes more attractive to prospective students.

The second dimension relates to institutional learning experiences, particularly the quality of teaching, exposure to geospatial technologies, and the availability of fieldwork opportunities. Geography has traditionally been recognized as a field-based discipline in which experiential learning plays a critical role in shaping students' understanding of spatial processes and environmental systems. Fieldwork, practical mapping exercises, and geospatial laboratory training allow students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations, thereby strengthening their engagement with the discipline. Studies in Geography education indicate that the availability of practical learning experiences significantly influences students' perceptions of the relevance and value of Geography (Safriani et al., 2023; Woodley et al., 2024). Where universities experience financial or logistical constraints that limit field excursions, geospatial training, or laboratory resources, students may perceive the discipline as less dynamic or less professionally relevant.

The third dimension concerns societal perception and social influence. Students' academic decisions are often shaped by the attitudes and expectations of parents, teachers, peers, and broader society. In many educational contexts, disciplines perceived as offering stronger economic prospects or higher professional prestige tend to attract greater numbers of students. Conversely, subjects that are viewed as less lucrative or less clearly linked to professional employment may experience declining enrolment. Research on subject choice in higher education indicates that societal perceptions and cultural expectations frequently influence students' academic preferences, particularly in developing countries where economic considerations play a significant role in educational decision-making (Fatima, 2016; Yusuf, 2024). If Geography is perceived primarily as a descriptive subject rather than a technologically driven and professionally oriented discipline, students may be encouraged to pursue alternative fields that appear to offer more direct employment pathways.

These three dimensions interact to shape students' decisions regarding enrolment in Geography programmes. In the context of this study, these dimensions are reflected in several observable factors investigated through the survey, including students' awareness of Geography-related career opportunities, the availability of fieldwork and practical learning experiences, financial barriers associated with field-based education, societal attitudes toward the discipline, and the influence of teachers, counsellors, and family members on students' academic choices. By integrating these factors, the conceptual framework provides a theoretical lens through which the empirical findings of this study can be interpreted. It enables the analysis to link students' perceptions and experiences to broader institutional and socioeconomic dynamics that influence the declining enrolment in Geography programmes within Nigerian universities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in southwest Nigeria comprising Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo states, a region characterized by a high concentration of universities offering Geography programmes (Olayemi & Amosun, 2024). The study adopted a quantitative research design within a positivist research paradigm aimed at examining students' perceptions of Geography education in Nigerian universities. The positivist paradigm was considered appropriate because the study seeks to measure observable attitudes and perceptions using structured survey data that can be analyzed statistically. The quantitative survey approach was suitable because it enables the systematic collection of comparable responses from a relatively large group of students across multiple universities, thereby allowing the identification of patterns and dominant factors influencing Geography enrolment decisions.

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire administered to undergraduate Geography students in selected public universities in southwest Nigeria during the 2023–2024 academic session. The questionnaire was distributed via institutional email lists, student social media groups, and departmental associations. All respondents were undergraduate university students and were therefore assumed to be 18 years or older at the time of participation. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the research prior to completing the questionnaire. Completion of the questionnaire was taken as implied informed consent. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were recorded anonymously to ensure confidentiality. The study involved minimal risk to participants and adhered to established ethical principles for social science research involving human subjects. Given that the study relied on anonymous survey data and did not involve the collection of sensitive personal information, formal institutional ethical approval was not required.

RESULTS

Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents (n=). The majority of participants (66.3%) were male, while 33.7% were female, indicating a gender imbalance in within the study sample. Most respondents (47.5%) were between the ages of 21 and 25 years, while 34.7% fell within the 17-20 age range, 16.8% were between 26 and 30 years, and only 1% were aged 31 years and above. This distribution reflects the characteristics of the study sample and suggests that the survey primarily captured the views of younger students who are still in their academic formative years. The academic profile reveals that 87.1% were undergraduates, 11.9% were graduates, and 1% belonged to other categories. Geographically, 77.8% of respondents resided in urban areas, 13.1% in sub-urban areas, and 9.1% in rural locations, suggesting that the perspectives captured are largely reflective of students in urban-based institutions. Given the use of purposive and convenience sampling, these demographic patterns are descriptive of the study sample and do not imply statistical representativeness of all Geography students in Nigerian universities.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Social and demographic parameters		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	67	66.3
	Female	34	33.7
Age (years)	18-20	35	34.7
	21-25	47	47.5
	26-30	17	16.8
	31 years and above	1	1.0
Academic level	Undergraduate	87	87.1
	Graduate	12	11.9
	Others	1	1.00
Geographic location	Urban	78	77.8
	Suburban	13	13.1
	Rural	9	9.1

Career awareness and perception of the discipline

Figure 1 summarizes the key factors contributing to the decline in Geography enrolment. Lack of career awareness (37%) was the most frequently cited factor influencing enrolment decisions. Competition from more popular courses such as Engineering and Medicine followed at 26%, reflecting a broader societal preference for professional fields perceived

to offer higher job security and earnings. Negative social perceptions of Geography as a low-prestige subject were cited by 22%, while 15% identified the perceived difficulty of the subject, especially its quantitative aspects and fieldwork requirements, as a deterrent. These findings, within the context of the study sample, suggest that both informational and perceptual barriers contribute significantly to the reduced appeal of Geography as a university major.

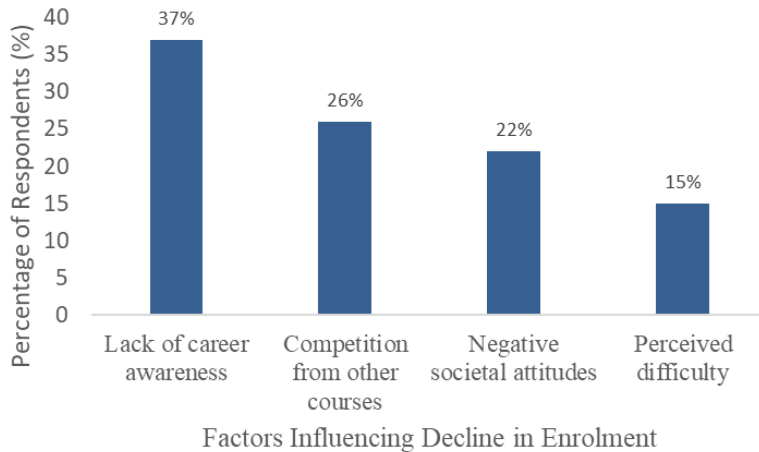


Figure 1. Factors influencing Geography enrolment decisions.

Perceived relevance of Geography in the job market

With respect to the perception of the relevance of Geography in the job market, Figure 2 shows a mixed pattern of responses. Nearly half of the respondents (47%) considered the subject somewhat relevant, while 28% regarded it as highly relevant. However, 18% viewed it as not very relevant, and 7% perceived it as irrelevant compared to other fields such as Information Technology or Business Administration. This pattern suggests a divergence in students' perceptions of the discipline's labour market relevance.

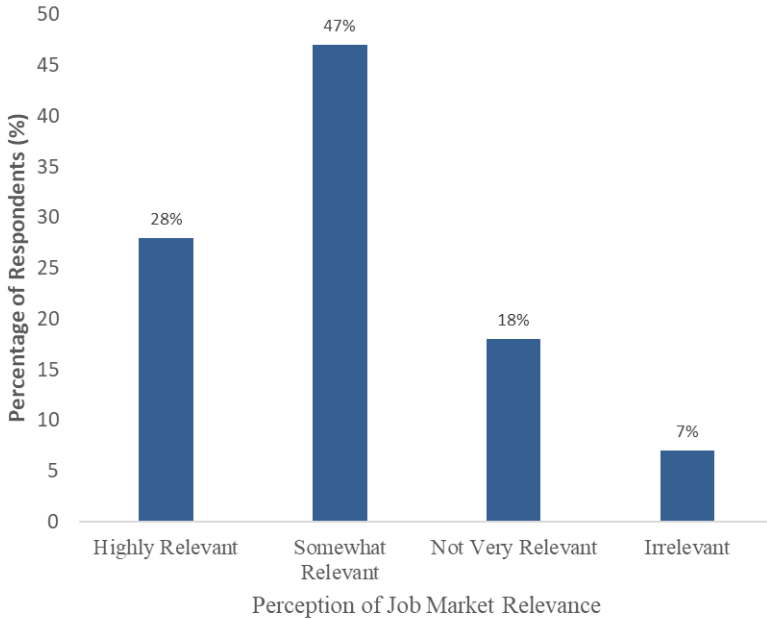


Figure 2. Perception on the relevance of Geography in the Nigerian job market.

Availability of fieldwork and practical opportunities

Figure 3 presents students' evaluation of fieldwork and practical experience. The results indicate varying levels of satisfaction among respondents, with 33% rating their experience as good and 19% as excellent. However, a notable proportion rated their experience as fair (28%) or poor (20%), suggesting that a significant share of students perceive limitations in the practical components of Geography training within the study sample. The findings align with prior studies highlighting similar concerns in Nigeria and other African countries (e.g. Boyle et al., 2007; Neerunjun, 2022; Mogborukor et al., 2024).

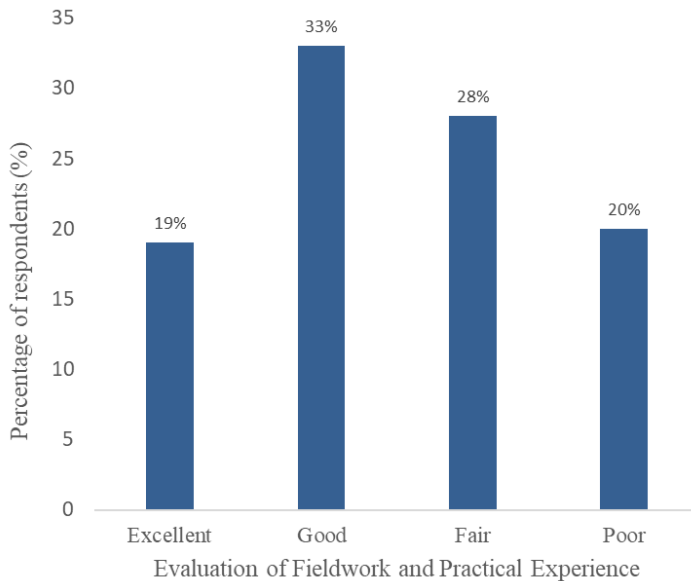


Figure 3. Students' evaluation of fieldwork and practical experience.

Financial constraints and their impact on enrolment

Financial limitations (Figure 4) were identified as an important factor influencing students' educational decisions. A total of 43% of respondents reported that financial constraints strongly influenced their academic choices, while 27% said they were moderately influenced. In contrast, 20% reported minimal influence, and 10% stated that financial issues had no impact on their academic choice. These findings suggest that financial constraints play a notable role in shaping students' participation in higher education and may also influence their choice of discipline, including Geography, within the study sample.

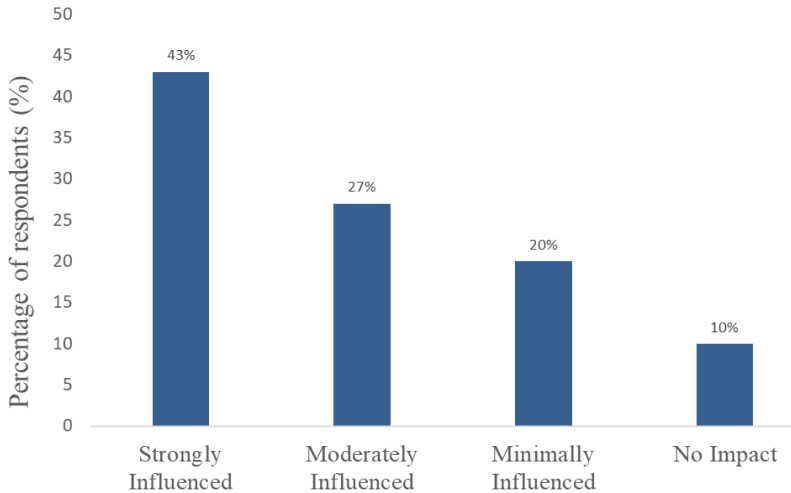


Figure 4. Influence of financial constraints on students' educational decisions.

Societal perceptions and attitudes towards Geography

Figure 5 summarizes students' perceptions of how Geography is viewed within Nigerian society. About 29% of respondents believed that Geography is viewed positively, 41% perceived a neutral societal attitude, 18% perceived it negatively, and only 12% thought it was viewed very positively. These results show that, from the perspective of the surveyed students, societal attitudes toward Geography are largely neutral. This predominance of neutral responses suggests a limited level of public enthusiasm or awareness of the discipline's value, as inferred from the distribution of responses in Figure 5. It is important to note that these findings reflect students' perceptions of societal views rather than direct evidence from the broader public.

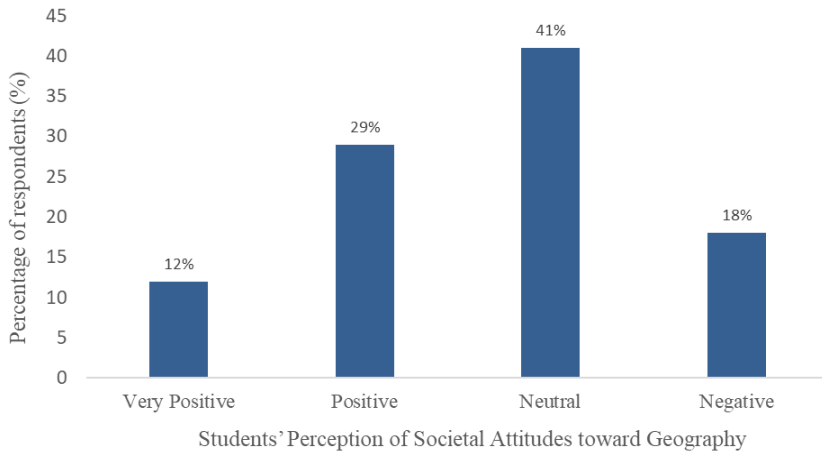


Figure 5. Societal perception of Geography as a worthwhile discipline.

When asked to identify the most significant societal influences on their choice of study, Figure 6 shows that 34% of respondents cited parental influence, 30% pointed to peer influence, 22% mentioned cultural perceptions that undervalue Geography, and 14% identified media portrayal. These findings suggest that, based on the responses of the surveyed students, family and peer networks play a dominant role in shaping academic decisions.

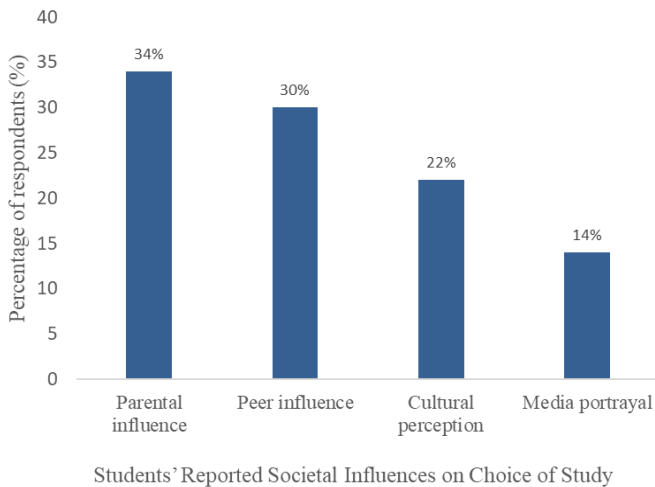


Figure 6. Students' reported societal influences on their choice of study.

Influence of teachers, counsellors and secondary school exposure

The influence of teachers and guidance counsellors was also assessed (Figure 7). Figure 7a show that 38% of respondents found their teachers to be somewhat encouraging toward Geography, 25% perceived them as neutral, 22% reported discouragement, and 15% said teachers were highly encouraging. These findings suggest that, based on the responses of the surveyed students, encouragement from teachers is moderate rather than strongly supportive. Figure 7b shows that 45% of respondents reported that their secondary school exposure had a strong impact on their choice of study, while 27% indicated a moderate impact, 18% a slight impact, and 10% no impact. This suggests that prior school exposure plays a significant role in shaping students' academic decisions.

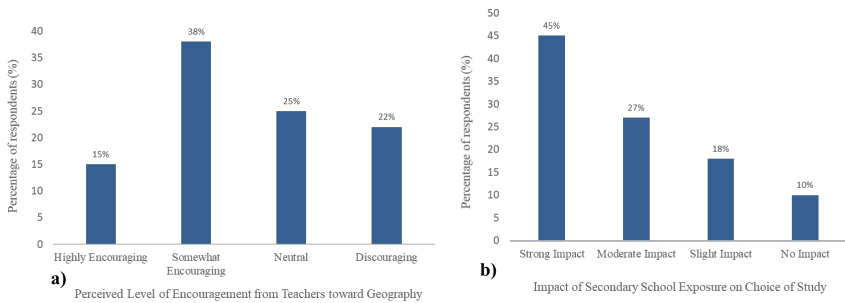


Figure 7. (a) Students' perceptions of encouragement from teachers toward Geography, (b) perceived impact of secondary school exposure on choice of study.

Strategies to revitalize Geography education

Respondents also provided recommendations to revitalize Geography education. When asked to select the most effective strategies for promoting the discipline from a set of predefined options, Figure 8 shows that 39% supported greater awareness of career opportunities, 29% emphasized improved fieldwork and practical experiences, 18% suggested media campaigns showcasing Geography's importance, and 14% advocated for scholarships for Geography students.

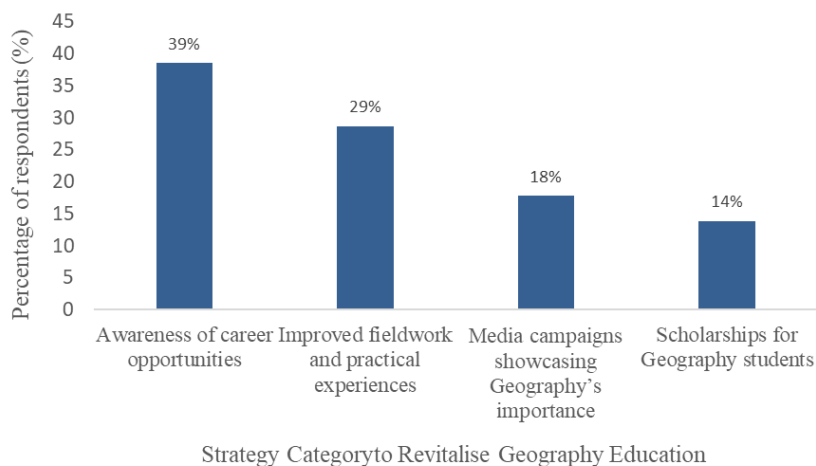


Figure 8. Most effective strategies to revitalize Geography education.

In addition, as shown in Table 2, the respondents provided suggestions aimed at improving the uptake and relevance of Geography education at the secondary school level. A total of 35% recommended curriculum improvements, 28% proposed more fieldtrips and practical sessions, 22% advocated for professional career talks by Geographers, and 15% favoured Geography clubs or extracurricular initiatives.

Table 2. Improving Geography at the secondary school level.

Recommended Action	Frequency (%)
Improved Geography curriculum	35
More fieldtrips and practical sessions	28
Career talks by professional Geographers	22
Establishment of Geography clubs or extracurricular activities	15

Regarding incentives for enrolment, respondents were asked to select the most preferred option, as shown in Figure 9. A total of 37% supported internship opportunities, 25% preferred access to professional mentoring, 22% recommended scholarships, and 16% endorsed guaranteed job placements after graduation.

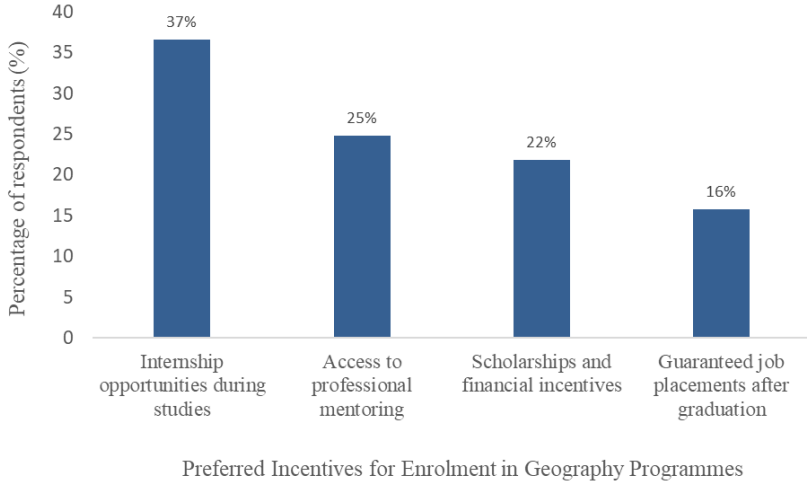


Figure 9. Most preferred incentives for enrolment in Geography programmes.

Finally, Figure 10 presents respondents' views on how university Geography programmes can be made more attractive. Results show that 40% favoured updating the curriculum to include GIS and remote sensing, 26% recommended stronger collaboration with industry partners, 22% suggested enhancing the quality of teaching and learning materials, and 12% proposed organizing student competitions and conferences. These findings suggest that, based on the responses of the surveyed students, curriculum modernization and industry engagement are key priorities for improving the attractiveness of Geography programmes.

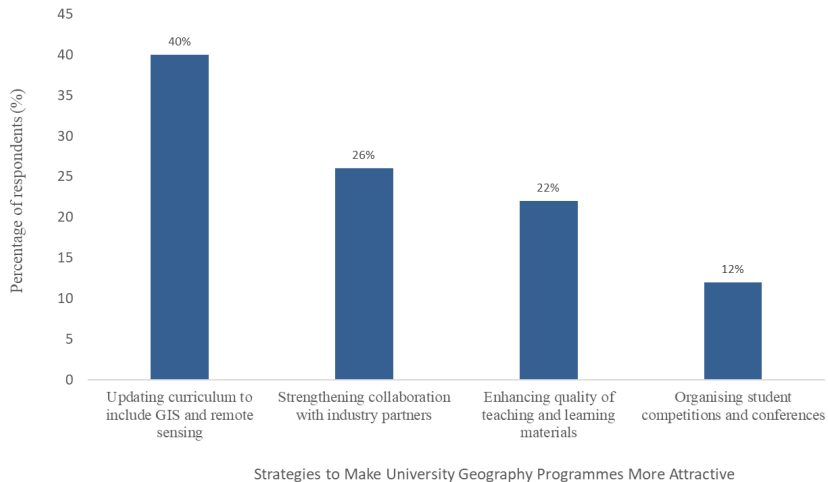


Figure 10. Most preferred strategies for making university Geography programmes more attractive.

Taken together, the results highlight several interconnected factors influencing declining Geography enrolment in Nigerian universities, including limited career awareness, institutional challenges affecting practical learning, and mixed societal perceptions of the discipline. These patterns provide the empirical basis for the discussion that follows, where the findings are interpreted through the conceptual framework guiding this study.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that declining Geography enrolment in Nigerian universities is shaped by a combination of limited career awareness, weak institutional support for practical learning, financial constraints, and mixed societal perceptions of the discipline. Interpreted through the conceptual framework adopted in this study, these findings reflect the combined influence of career awareness, institutional learning experiences, and societal perceptions in shaping students' decisions to enroll in Geography programmes. This pattern is consistent with evidence from Nigeria, other African countries, and wider global studies, which similarly show that Geography tends to lose visibility where students are uncertain about its career relevance, where practical learning opportunities are weak, and where the discipline is overshadowed by more highly professionalized fields (Kariuki, 2022; Lee, 2023; Kriewaldt et al., 2025).

This study provides evidence on the factors associated with declining Geography enrolment among the surveyed students, highlighting the interplay of informational, socioeconomic, and institutional influences. Informational gaps and career perceptions

emerged as some of the most significant drivers of declining Geography enrolment. A lack of awareness of Geography-related career opportunities was identified by 37% of respondents, while 26% pointed to competition from high-prestige disciplines such as Engineering and Medicine (Figure 1). These findings suggest a tendency to prioritize disciplines perceived to offer clearer professional pathways and stronger employment prospects. This pattern reflects a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths)-oriented preference within the study sample and is consistent with observations in developing economies where students often prioritize fields associated with clearer vocational identities and job security (Neerunjun, 2022). Similar findings have also been reported in African contexts where students' interest in Geography is strongly influenced by the visibility of career opportunities attached to the discipline (Kariuki, 2022). Furthermore, as shown in Figure 2, nearly half of the respondents (47%) consider Geography somewhat relevant to the job market, while only 28% view it as highly relevant. This suggests that students perceive a gap between the academic curriculum and labour market expectations. Similar concerns have been identified in studies highlighting challenges in aligning higher education systems with labour market needs (Tomlinson, 2017; OECD, 2020). Globally, when Geography is not clearly associated with technical and applied skills such as GIS and spatial analysis, it is frequently misperceived as a generalist discipline with limited economic utility (Lee, 2023). Financial constraints influenced 43% of respondents' academic choices (Figure 4). In the Nigerian context, out-of-pocket costs of Geography, such as fieldtrip fees and specialized mapping tools, become a major deterrent during periods of high inflation, as reported in related studies (Emiola, 2018; Olayemi and Amosun, 2024). These financial demands often force a choice between academic interest and economic survival, a phenomenon observed across field-based sciences (Ramírez et al., 2023; Kamalu, 2025). Insufficient financial aid in Nigerian higher education exacerbates these challenges, making field-intensive disciplines particularly inaccessible to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Ogunode & Musa, 2020; Agbai et al., 2021; Korie et al., 2023).

Institutional learning experiences, particularly fieldwork and practical exposure, play an important role in shaping students' perceptions of Geography education. As shown in Figure 3, a considerable proportion of respondents rated their fieldwork experience as fair (28%) or poor (20%), indicating varying levels of satisfaction with practical learning opportunities. Fieldwork has long been recognized as a central component of Geography education, enabling students to connect theoretical knowledge with real-world environmental and spatial processes (Boyle et al., 2007). More recent studies have emphasized the importance of experiential learning and practical training in sustaining student engagement and enhancing the professional relevance of Geography and related disciplines (Ramone, 2023; Bruinsma, 2024; Czimre et al., 2024; Woodley et al., 2024; Hurrell et al., 2025). Societal attitudes and social influences through parents and peers influence students' decisions about Geography as a field of study, consistent with research demonstrating the role of social context in academic decision-making (Ezeani et al., 2023;

Kennedy & Chizoba, 2025). As shown in the survey responses, students' perceptions of broader societal attitudes toward Geography were largely neutral (41%), suggesting a limited awareness of the discipline's contribution to national development. This aligns with work indicating that students' evaluation of academic disciplines is strongly influenced by perceived relevance and societal recognition (Tomlinson, 2017). Academic decisions in this context appear to be strongly mediated by social networks such as parental influence (34%) and peer influence (30%) (e.g. Koçak et al., 2021; Offando & Sukma, 2024). Thus, students' perceptions of how significant others value different disciplines may influence their decision to pursue Geography, particularly in contexts where career prospects and economic considerations are important. Furthermore, weak advocacy at the secondary school level may contribute to the discipline's low visibility. Although 45% of respondents reported that their initial awareness of Geography came through school exposure, the quality of such exposure appears insufficient to compete with the strong promotion of other STEM-oriented disciplines (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021; Pach et al., 2025; Sunday et al., 2025). Similar patterns have been observed in other educational contexts where Geography struggles to compete with disciplines that enjoy stronger public visibility and clearer professional branding (Kriewaldt et al., 2025).

To revitalize Geography education, the findings show a clear preference for curriculum modernization and improved communication of career opportunities. As shown in Figure 10, 40% of respondents favoured updating the university curriculum to incorporate geospatial technologies such as GIS and remote sensing, which may enhance perceptions of the discipline's relevance. Previous studies have similarly emphasized the role of geospatial technologies and digital skills in improving student engagement and professional orientation (Beyoğlu & Hursen, 2023; Lee, 2023; Manakane et al., 2023; Bondarenko, 2025). Improving enrolment requires coordinated efforts that combine curriculum reform with career awareness and experiential learning opportunities (e.g. Cascante-Campos, 2022; Golightly, 2025). These recommendations align with global strategies for Geography that link the discipline with emerging technological labour markets (Simerská, 2023; Amin & Jamaludin, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that declining Geography enrolment in Nigerian universities is driven by the combined influence of limited career awareness, institutional learning experiences, and students' perceptions of the discipline. The findings indicate that students' choices are shaped by their understanding of career opportunities, the quality of practical learning experiences, and the influence of parents, peers, and perceived societal attitudes. The results also suggest that Geography is often perceived as less relevant to the labour market compared to more professionally defined disciplines. Variations in fieldwork and practical exposure may affect students' engagement with the discipline. To address these challenges, the findings highlight the importance of curriculum modernisation, particularly through the integration of geospatial technologies such as GIS and remote sensing, as

well as improved communication of career opportunities. Strengthening industry linkages, expanding internship opportunities, and enhancing early exposure to Geography at the secondary school level may also improve student interest in the discipline.

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