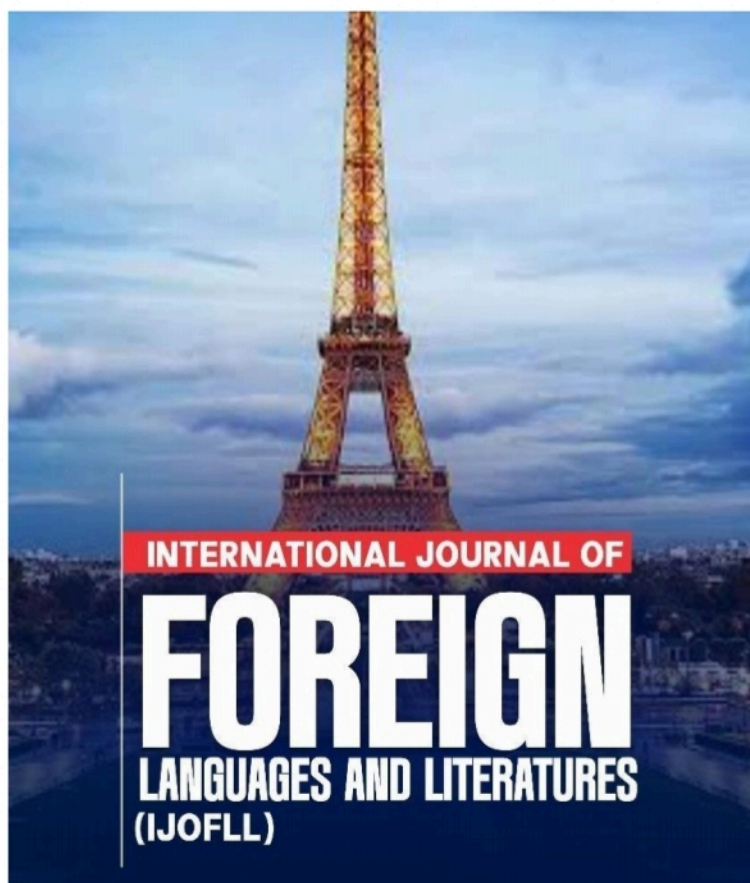




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IJOFL, also known as International Journal of Foreign Languages and Literatures, is a peer-review journal of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Port Harcourt. It is conceived to promote rigour and erudition in intellectual research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Only well-researched articles and reviews in French, English and German especially which adhere strictly to rich intellectual culture and standard will be received and published after double-blind peer review and in so far as the researcher is a University-based scholar or comes from a recognized professional body or institute of very high repute.

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This inaugural edition in September 2024 marked the beginning of a great journey into the world of scholarly inquiry with unbound hopes and aspirations. The papers that appear here are tailored either in MLA (9TH edition) or APA (7th edition) reference style.

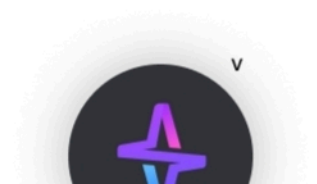
We congratulate the contributors and remain optimistic that the volume will make great impact in the academic circle and so will be well-received by the reading public.

Dr. Michael N. Mombe

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Reimagining French Language Education: A Comparative Study of Immersion Programmes in Badagry and Lomé for University of Ilorin Students

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Abstract

As a graduation requirement, students of French Studies in Nigeria are required to “spend the third year of study (for UTME candidates) and the second year of study (for Direct Entry candidates) at the Nigeria French Language Village, Badagry, or in a French-speaking country for the One-Year-Abroad French Language Immersion Programme” (CCMAS 2023:436). Although this requirement is intended to produce accomplished graduates who are competent in both spoken and written French, the learning of the French language, according to Onah (2019), Okoedion (2019), and Odion et al. (2025), continues to face numerous challenges in Nigeria. This study adopts the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, as a case study to explore the design and implementation of exchange and language immersion programmes, including teaching and assessment methods, using a causal-comparative research design. The study found that some Unilorin students preferred to go to Togo, a French-speaking country, for the One-Year-Abroad French Language Immersion Programme, after more than two decades of participation in the Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV), Badagry, for the same purpose. The study concluded that the laudable intention of the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC), which prescribes language immersion as one of the graduation requirements for French Studies in Nigerian universities, may inadvertently contribute to some of the problems confronting the study of French as a foreign language in Nigeria. It therefore recommends that Nigerian universities should leverage the existing policy that allows study in a French-speaking country as an alternative to the NFLV, Badagry, as this option may provide students with a unique opportunity to experience a different culture and academic environment while earning credits toward their degrees.

Key words: Language Immersion, Language Education, Unilorin, CCMAS, Students’ Exchange Programme

INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are interwoven, and together they define our cultural traits, norms, and values (National Language Policy (NLP), 2022). Language learning through linguistic or cultural immersion is critical for developing cross-cultural competence and promoting language proficiency. Language immersion, defined as a method of learning a new language by surrounding oneself with it in everyday situations, encourages active use and natural acquisition. Thus, language immersion has been found to be an effective way of improving language learning outcomes, as it provides learners with opportunities to engage with native speakers, learn about the culture, and develop cultural competence (Apata, 2023).

Participation in language immersion programmes is important in the context of learning French as a foreign language in Nigeria because the Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standard (CCMAS) requires that “a student of French Studies in Nigeria shall spend the third year of studies (for UTME candidates) and the second year of studies (for Direct Entry candidates) at the Nigeria French Language Village, Badagry, or in a French-speaking country for the One-Year-Abroad French Language Immersion Programme” (CCMAS 2023:436).

Despite this graduation requirement, which is aimed at producing highly skilled multilingual graduates with a keen understanding of human issues and who are well positioned to perform their roles as responsible members of the human community, the learning of the French language in Nigerian tertiary institutions is still characterized by rote memorization and grammar drills, among many other challenges. These recurring problems, according to Apata (2023), limit learners’ ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

In its bid to address this challenge, the University of Ilorin (Unilorin) explored an immersion and credit mobility programme within the framework of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Unilorin, Nigeria, and the University of Lomé (Unilomé), Togo. The aim was to expose learners to authentic language use and cultural experiences. Hence, students of the Department of French, University of Ilorin, in their third year of study, underwent a One-Year-Abroad French Language Immersion Programme (FLIP) for the 2024/2025 academic year at the Unilomé campus, Lomé, Togo.

However, this paper aims to reimagine French language education through a comparative study of immersion programmes in Badagry and Lomé for University of Ilorin students. The objective is to provide insights and recommendations for the university, stakeholders, and students on how to enhance French language learning through language immersion in the Unilorin context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Social Constructivist Theory

Discussing this study through a theoretical framework is essential; hence, it is grounded in social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that language learning is a socially mediated process. Social constructivism was developed by the post-revolutionary Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Hoose, 2020). He posited that knowledge and meaning are constructed through social interactions and cultural contexts.

In the context of this study, the theory suggests that University of Ilorin students' language learning and cultural awareness are shaped by their experiences and interactions within the immersion programmes in Badagry and Lomé. Because Vygotsky's (1978) theory highlights the role of social interaction and cultural context in shaping language learning, it is particularly applicable to this study in the following areas:

1. **Social Interaction: examining** how Unilorin students' interactions with native speakers, peers, and instructors in the immersion programmes influence their language learning and cultural awareness.
2. **Cultural Context: investigating** how the cultural contexts of the immersion programmes (Badagry and Lomé) shape students' understanding of the French language and culture.
3. **Mediation: exploring** how the immersion programmes mediate Unilorin students' language learning and cultural awareness, considering factors such as programme duration, intensity, and curriculum design.

The social constructivist theory will assist this study in gaining a deeper understanding of the complex factors that influence language learning and cultural awareness in immersion programmes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context of French Language Education in Nigeria

Language education is the teaching and learning of any language, either as a foreign or second language, within a formal educational setting; it also refers to the formal acquisition of communicative skills by an individual (Saleh, 2019). As Nigeria's National Language Policy (NLP, 2022) considers language as one of the most important human attributes and endowments that are essential and germane to national, socio-economic, and human development, French language education in Nigeria emerged as a government initiative aimed at making French the second official language for regional interaction.

Arguably, the teaching and learning of the French language in Anglophone countries, including Nigeria, can be traced to the Yaoundé Conference of 1961, when the then

Organisation of African Unity (OAU) formulated a policy for linguistic integration in Africa. In a bid to foster unity among the newly independent nations of the continent, it was agreed that English and French should be taught in schools of member countries at both secondary and tertiary levels (Olusa & Akintayo, 2017). Meanwhile, Omolewa (1978) opines that the teaching of the French language began in Nigeria in 1859 when the first secondary school was founded in the Lagos Colony. Being one of the foremost Anglophone countries to teach French in its schools in Africa, Iteogu (2016) posited that not much has been achieved with respect to the teaching of the French language in Nigeria since the colonial era.

Over the years, policies supporting the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria have been documented in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1998, 2004). Hence, French was initially introduced into Nigeria's educational curriculum as an optional subject; it was later grouped with Arabic as a vocational elective before being elevated to the status of a second official language in Nigeria. "Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools but non-vocational elective at the senior secondary school" (NPE, 2004:4).

As concerns grew regarding Nigerians' attitudes toward the study of the French language, the Federal Government, in 1991, established the Nigerian French Language Village (NFLV) as an inter-university centre for French studies (Faniran, 2016). In addition to other non-formal programmes for adult workers, the NFLV, Badagry, is known mainly for organizing the one-year language immersion programme for students in their third year of study in universities, colleges of education, and, more recently, some polytechnic students of bilingual secretarial studies. Primarily, the NFLV was established by the Federal Government of Nigeria as a domestic alternative to the mandatory one-year-abroad programme, which previously took place in France or other Francophone countries in West Africa.

More than 30 years after its establishment, the NFLV has no doubt saved the nation significant foreign exchange, created a simulated environment for learning French, and prepared students for professional life in French studies. However, why some Nigerian students, who ought to be enrolled at the NFLV, according to Salau (2022), are still being lured to unaccredited language centres in nearby countries such as Cotonou and Porto-Novo remains a matter of concern.

University of Ilorin Students' Exchange Programme

The University of Ilorin (Unilorin) is a leading centre of higher learning in Nigeria and the West African sub-region. It is a renowned institution known for academic excellence, a stable academic calendar, and a steadfast commitment to research, innovation, and character development. Established in 1975, the university is determined to connect with the world by supporting international partnerships and collaborative research. By facilitating a student exchange programme and fulfilling the one-year-abroad component of the CCMAS, students of French in their third year of study spent the entire 2024/2025 academic year at the

Unilomé campus in Lomé, Togo. The student exchange was facilitated by a reciprocal agreement between Unilorin and Unilomé, the host institution.

Language immersion and student exchange programmes are closely connected. Hence, recent studies, such as Goldoni (2023) and El-Asri and El-Karfa (2024), highlight the strong connection between student exchange programmes and language immersion experiences. Their research suggests that participation in exchange programmes can significantly enhance language proficiency, cultural understanding, and personal growth. This aligns with the Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science's description of a student exchange programme as a study programme that enables students to travel abroad from their home university to another institution, either internationally or domestically, through arrangements between the two institutions. The duration of an exchange programme, depending on the institution and course, may range from weeks to months. Such programmes can lead to improved language skills, increased cultural awareness, and enhanced global understanding.

Ultimately, student exchange programmes inherently create language immersion by placing students in foreign environments where they must use the target language for daily activities, thereby dramatically accelerating fluency, vocabulary development, and cultural understanding beyond classroom learning, and transforming language acquisition from academic study into practical living (Artamonova, 2025).

Language Immersion and the Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS)

Language immersion is an educational approach in which learners are fully immersed in a foreign language for all or part of their learning time (Arola, 2023). Unlike traditional language instruction, which often focuses on vocabulary lists and grammar rules, immersion creates an environment where the target language serves as the medium of instruction and communication. This implies that all daily routines and activities, ranging from meals and playtimes to naptimes and outings, are conducted in the foreign language.

The foremost objective of the CCMAS is to “develop and enhance students’ awareness of the values, contributions, and potentialities of their own social, cultural, and spiritual environment” (CCMAS, 2023:23). This coincides with the notion expressed by the First Peoples’ Cultural Council (2018) that immersion is the most effective way to learn a language because it creates a natural learning environment similar to how individuals learn their first language. The overall goal of the CCMAS is to ensure that Nigerian university graduates meet global 21st-century standards while allowing universities approximately 30% flexibility to innovate and include specialized content.

As Nigeria’s national framework for undergraduate education, the Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) defines the minimum academic requirements for higher education by outlining the essential knowledge needed across various fields, including

Arts, Sciences, Engineering, and Law. The CCMAS (2023) emerged from the process of restructuring the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) initiated in 2018, to reflect 21st-century realities in existing and new disciplines and programmes in the Nigerian University System.

French language immersion in Nigeria cannot be fully or effectively discussed outside the context of the CCMAS. Apart from listing French as one of the 26 programmes and degree options in the Arts, an essential part of its graduation requirements stipulates that UTME and Direct Entry students must spend the third year of study and the second year of study, respectively, at the Nigeria French Language Village, Badagry, or in a French-speaking country for the One-Year-Abroad French Language Immersion Programme. The goal is not only to teach the French language but also to integrate immersion into all aspects of the curriculum. This means that, especially within the context of the Nigerian university CCMAS, other components of the language, such as literature, grammar, and translation, are taught in French, thereby providing learners with a holistic and authentic language learning experience.

Unfortunately, the establishment of the Nigeria French Language Village in Badagry over three decades ago has not diminished the ongoing debate regarding the optimal location for conducting immersion programmes. Even today, the question of whether to retain Badagry or consider alternative sites, such as French-speaking countries, remains a recurring theme in academic discourse and among students. It is hoped that the findings presented later in this study will reveal whether systemic failure or a lack of political will to implement effective language-related policies is responsible for the challenges currently observed.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design, specifically a causal-comparative design, to reimagine French language education through a comparative study of immersion programmes in Badagry, Nigeria, and Lomé, Togo, for University of Ilorin students. The causal-comparative design is appropriate for this study because it retrospectively compares students who participated in the Badagry immersion programme and those who participated in the Lomé programme to explore differences in their outcomes without any form of manipulation. The design aims to identify potential causal relationships by examining pre-existing differences between the two groups, even though it cannot definitively establish causation due to possible confounding factors, such as prior language experience. The design aligns with the study's title by comparing the effectiveness of the two programmes for University of Ilorin students.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A total of 39 students were targeted, comprising 16 students from Togo and 23 students from Badagry. The two groups were expected to respond to questions relating to their immersion experiences through a Google Form questionnaire. Twenty-two (22) students responded, representing 56.4% of the targeted population.

Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire comprising both open-ended and close-ended questions was used for data collection. The questionnaire captured demographic information, immersion experience, language proficiency, cultural awareness, and comparative perspectives. To ensure clarity and reliability, the instrument was validated through expert review and pilot-tested during a random classroom session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Information

The demographic data reveal that 77.3% of the respondents who participated in the immersion programmes were between the ages of 21 and 25, indicating a level of maturity appropriate for immersion learning. Being a francophone or non-francophone was also considered important for the study, and almost all respondents (89.9%) were non-francophones. While 95.5% indicated that they had participated in an immersion programme before, all respondents (100%) reported that they had been studying French for nearly 10 years. The respondents' ages and early commencement of French language study support the notion proposed by Munro and Mann (2005) that younger learners benefit significantly from language immersion and often develop more native-like accents due to neural plasticity.

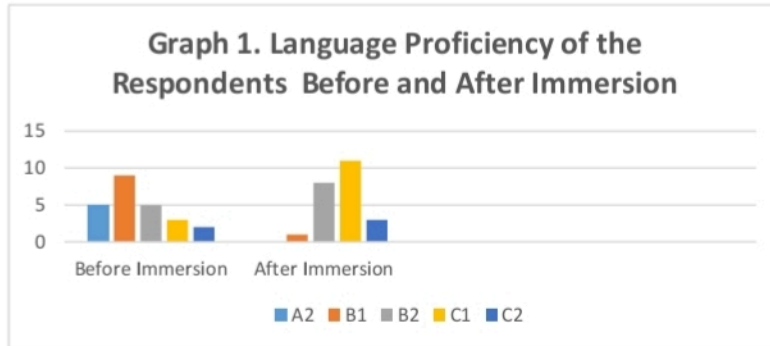
Immersion Programme Experience

Reports on participants' experiences reveal that 54.5% of the respondents attended the immersion programme in Lomé, Togo, while 45.5% attended the programme in Badagry, Lagos. On a scale of 1 to 5, 54.5% of the respondents rated their experience as 3 out of 5 (fairly good), indicating moderate satisfaction rather than strong enthusiasm. While a few respondents differed in their views on what they considered most beneficial to their French language study, more than 80%—representing a clear majority—identified communication in French through constant, natural, and contextual exposure as the greatest benefit.

Similarly, the challenges encountered during their stay at the two immersion centres were categorized into three sub-themes, each accompanied by corresponding percentages: language barriers (40.9%), academic challenges (31.8%), and cultural or environmental adjustment (18.2%). According to the British School of Valencia (2024), constant communication—identified by respondents as a major benefit—requires adaptability and

resilience, as it challenges students to step out of their comfort zones and face unfamiliar situations, since language immersion promotes independence.

Language Proficiency



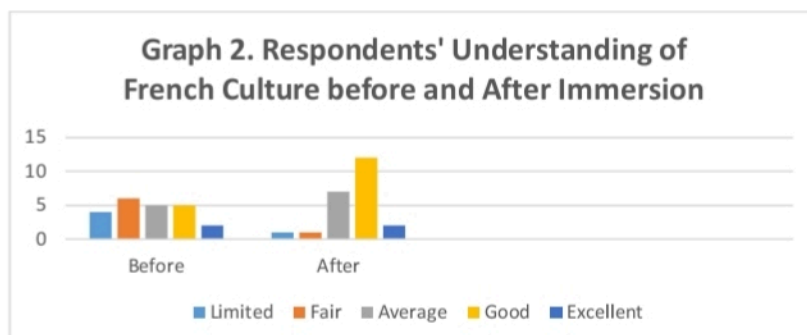
Source: Field Survey, 2025

Graph 1 above provides information on the state of the respondents' language proficiency before and after participation in the immersion programme. Respondents were rated on the six-level scale of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Level A1 was purposely left out, considering that the respondents were already in the third and fourth years of their French studies at the University of Ilorin. Hence, rating their language proficiency on a scale of 1 to 5 means: 1 = A2, 2 = B1, 3 = B2, 4 = C1, and 5 = C2.

The graph clearly indicates that the respondents' language proficiency improved significantly, especially as the 22% recorded at the A2 level before immersion dropped to 0% after immersion. Similarly, the 22.7% at the B2 level before immersion increased to 36.4% after immersion, while 13.6% at the C1 level before immersion rose to 50% after immersion. In addition, 9.1% at the C2 level before immersion increased to 13.6% after immersion.

Overall, 81.8% of the respondents, compared to 18.2%, agreed that the immersion programme significantly improved their French language skills. Furthermore, 81.8% reported noticeable improvement in their speaking and listening skills in French, while 54.5% and 40.9% also indicated improvement in their reading and writing skills, respectively. Improvement, especially in speaking and listening skills, further corroborates the findings of Lafleur and Dumas (2023), which suggest that learners are challenged to step out of their comfort zones and confront unfamiliar situations, as language immersion promotes independence.

Cultural Awareness



Source: Field Survey, 2025

Language and culture are deeply intertwined; therefore, understanding French culture is crucial to learning the French language. The information in Graph 2 above reveals that the respondents' understanding of French culture improved significantly after returning from the immersion programme. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = limited and 5 = excellent, the graph indicates that 18.2% and 27.3% of the respondents whose knowledge of French culture before immersion was limited and fair, respectively, both declined to 4.5% after immersion. While those who claimed to have excellent knowledge remained at 9.1% both before and after immersion, those with average and good knowledge of French culture increased from 22.7% before immersion to 31.8% and 54.5%, respectively, after immersion.

A significant proportion of respondents (68.2%) believe that the immersion programme enhanced their appreciation of French culture. This finding reiterates the age-long notion proposed by Krashen (1981) that immersion provides learners with opportunities to gain valuable perspectives through cultural enrichment. Krashen's work emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input and authentic language use in language acquisition, both of which are often achieved through immersion in the target-language culture.

Comparative Analysis

A 2:1 ratio of respondents indicated that the immersion programme in Lomé was better than that in Badagry in terms of language learning experience. The reasons for preferring Lomé to Badagry were regrouped into three sub-themes, namely: (1) Cultural Immersion and Environment, (2) Language Improvement and Practice, and (3) Personal Growth and Experience. The respondents placed Badagry on par with Lomé in terms of Cultural Immersion and Environment and Personal Growth and Experience, but differed in Language Improvement and Practice, where 22.7% preferred Lomé compared to 13.6% for Badagry. Overall, 63.6% of the respondents stated that they were likely to recommend Lomé to other students, 36.4% preferred to recommend Badagry, while 18.2% indicated that they were unlikely to recommend either of the two locations.

Conclusion

This study acknowledges that the immersion programme in Badagry is relatively affordable and that the lecturers are competent; however, it also reveals that the French language learning experience there is less attractive and somewhat limited, as reported by some of the students who participated in the study. This limitation further underscores the need to reform the current National Language Policy in Nigeria in order to promote the teaching and learning of foreign languages and to integrate richer cultural immersion experiences into language instruction to enhance learning outcomes.

While cultural immersion experiences involve exposing learners to the target language and culture in real-life situations rather than solely within the classroom (Byrnes, 2002), some students in this study highlighted location and context as major constraints to effective immersion at the Nigerian French Language Village, Badagry. They further corroborated Byrnes' position by sharing a memorable immersion experience of a course mate who, according to them, learned the French word for *banana* not in the classroom but in the marketplace, where she overheard someone say, "Je veux acheter des bananes," which literally translates to "I want to buy bananas."

No doubt, the CCMAS clearly provides for immersion within the Nigerian university education system; however, the implementation of cultural immersion experiences in French language teaching in Nigeria still faces several challenges. Consequently, the findings of this study reveal that Lomé, Togo, is the preferred destination for immersion programmes among University of Ilorin students. Some of the major reasons for this preference include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. A fully immersive Francophone environment
2. Greater opportunities for language improvement
3. Personal growth and development
4. Exposure to real-life use of the French language
5. Availability of native speakers and a supportive linguistic environment

Recommendations

- **Better preparation:** Regardless of location, preparation for the immersion programme should begin earlier to avoid late commencement of academic activities and unnecessary apprehension among stakeholders.
- **Effective policy implementation:** The immersion programme should be observed for a full academic year, as recommended by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in the CCMAS policy document, rather than for a single semester, as currently practiced at Unilorin.

- **Proper documentation:** When students are travelling to Francophone countries, passport- and document-related issues should be meticulously handled, and the cooperation of relevant embassies and immigration officials should be sought well in advance to ensure seamless travel.
- **Proper orientation:** To prepare students adequately for immersion, early and comprehensive orientation programmes should be organized on issues such as finance, exchange rates, culture, transportation, food, and related matters.
- **Francophone simulation:** As suggested by one respondent, the NFLV, Badagry, could integrate more native French speakers into its environment. Traders and vendors within a “French Village” should ideally be Francophone so that French becomes a natural part of students’ daily lives rather than merely a classroom subject.
- **Sustainability:** Since an immersion pathway has been established with Unilorin through the student exchange programme, Unilorin should sustain and strengthen this collaboration for the benefit of immersion and future students.

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