Exploring International Postgraduate Students’ Experiences at a South African University

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South Africa is one of the few countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa that are making concerted efforts to attract international students to institutions of higher learning. However, an array of studies has revealed both pleasant and unpleasant experiences faced by international students while studying in South African institutions. This study explored the experiences of international postgraduate students studying at a University in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. Qualitative research method was employed in the study. Data was collected from nineteen (19) international students currently registered for postgraduate studies in the university. The social learning theory was used to underpin the study in relation to the experiences of the international students while studying in South Africa. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to collect data from the participants. Data collected was analysed through thematic data analysis method which brought about construction of various themes which include acclimatisation, socialisation, academic terrain, and financial affordability, among others. Findings of the study revealed affordability of tuition, a conducive environment, adaptability, quality of education provided, amongst others, are experiences which incite international students migrate to study in the selected South African based university. However, securing funding is a major challenge to many of the participants. Based on the findings, therefore, the research study recommends the introduction of a special endowment fund by South African universities to attract the attention of prominent wealthy personalities within the continent. Such an endowment fund could be used to sponsor indigent students from Africa to study and conduct research in any of the South African universities.

Key words: Internationalisation, International students, Postgraduate studies, South Africa
INTRODUCTION

Since 1994, when South Africa switched to the democratic system of government, higher education climate in the country has undergone several reforms with a view to getting rid of the stench that the apartheid government created and is wearing a new garment of transformation and attractions, both nationally and internationally. One of the attempts made to attract the attentions of the international community to the higher education sector in the country, was the radical internationalisation policy aimed at making higher education institutions in South Africa open, accessible and conducive for international students. Largely, there has been a significant increase in the number of international students enrolling into postgraduate programs in various universities in South Africa (Mokhothu & Callaghan, 2018). According to the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2017:9) Internationalisation of higher education refers to “an intentional or steered process to integrate or infuse intercultural, international and global dimensions in higher education; to advance the goals, functions and delivery of higher education and thus to enhance the quality of education and research”. The increased interest by international students to enroll for postgraduate education in South Africa is motivated by both internal and external factors such as the affordability of tuition, an institutional internationalisation policy, reputation and ranking status of the university, and availability of funding, among others (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015).

Furthermore, Teichler (2008) notes two dimensions of mobility trends which influences student choice of study abroad: vertical mobility and horizontal mobility. Vertical mobility is explained to be the migration of students towards the nations with better economy and advanced levels of higher education. In horizontal mobility, however, the education or qualifications sought is for the sake of existing collaboration between one’s country or institution with another. Presently, one can say that the vertical mobility is dominant when explaining the influx of international students to the South African higher education institution. Similarly, Gubba (2014) was of the opinion that African students who decide to migrate to South Africa for the sake of further education, do so in search of the best and most acceptable learning. Since Higher Education Institutions in South Africa are attracting the interest of thousands of international students annually, the study about the experiences of these international students, who come from different parts of Africa and beyond, is vital.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine the trend of internationalisation of higher education in South Africa with specific reference to the experiences of international students from Africa that enrolled in postgraduate programs in a KwaZulu Natal based University. This study has implications for the ambitions and commitments of the Department of Higher Education and
Training (DHET) towards enhancing the quality of research in South African universities to meet up with the international standard (DHET, 2017).

It is expected that the study will lead to the generation of new knowledge and scholarship about how international students in South African universities learn and cope with study abroad, and how their experiences cumulate into their perceptions about the internationalisation of higher education in the South African context. Such knowledge allows better understanding of the higher education stakeholders in the country about what conditions inform the interest, enrolment and completion rates of international students in the postgraduate programs.

INTERNALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The internationalisation of higher education is one of the crucial priorities of many nations of the world today (Olaniran, 2018). South Africa is one of the countries in Africa whose higher education landscape is increasingly influenced by globalisation and internationalisation trends. The high demand for higher education and higher degree qualifications by employers of labour, encouraged many young people to seek admission in foreign universities based in the United Kingdom, United States, and South Africa. According to a report published by the World Bank in the year 2010, the number of students that enrolled in higher education in Africa rose from 2.7 million in the year 1991 to 9.3 million in the year 2006 (World Bank, 2010). This increase in the rate of higher education enrolment is said to be the outcome of massification of education at both primary and secondary school levels aided by the political independence that happened in many African countries (Mohamedbhai, 2008). It should be noted however, that this massification of education exposed the incapacitation of many higher education institutions which led to their failure to admit all the students graduating from high school with interest in higher education. A report published by the World Bank in the year 2010 revealed the ineptitude nature of many universities in Africa at the time:

> Universities are finding it extremely difficult to maintain a teaching staff. Lecture halls are crowded, and buildings are falling into disrepair, teaching equipment is not replenished, investment in research and training for new teachers is insufficient and many teachers must supplement their income by providing services to the private sector (World Bank, 2010:2).

However, one will not be far from being right to say that the above state of many higher education institutions in Africa gave rise to the vibrancy of the internationalisation of the higher education policy and practice of many countries of the world, including South Africa. Internationalisation of higher education could be defined as a process of injecting an international element into the
teaching, research and community engagement components of a higher education institution (Knight, 1999). Several studies (Huang, 2007; Knight, 2008; Altbach et al., 2009; De Wit, 2011) equates the concept of internalisation of education with the concept of globalisation. That is, they see internalisation of higher education as the product of globalisation in the education sector. Moreover, Teichler (2004:22) opines that “globalisation initially seemed to be defined as the totality of substantial changes in the context and inner life of higher education, related to growing interrelationships between different parts of the world whereby national borders are blurred or even seem to vanish”. It must be noted here that the overall goal of the internationalisation of higher education is to incorporate international and multicultural skills, knowledge and abilities towards preparing students for the competitive world of work both nationally and internationally.

According to the South African Department of Higher Education and Training, Internationalisation of Higher Education means the following (DHET, 2017:3):

- the cross-border movement of students and staff; international research collaboration; the offering of joint degrees by universities in different countries; the establishment of campuses by universities outside of their home countries; the growth of satellite learning and online distance education, including online educational institutions; arrangements between countries for the mutual recognition of qualifications; the regional harmonization of qualification systems; and the increasing inclusion of international, intercultural and global dimensions in university curricula.

Similarly, Merkx (2003:8) notes that the internationalisation of higher education at the global level was influenced by the quest for “foreign aid, study abroad programs, foreign students’ enrolments, and international studies such as foreign language". According to Gubba (2014), the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa was intensified in the 1990s when the debate about the political reform started. South Africa higher education stakeholders realised the advantages of the internationalisation of higher education, which included broader international collaboration as well as the recognition of the country’s qualifications at the international level. It is worthy of note, however, that South Africa has transformed to be the destination of choice for many students in the continent for postgraduate education. Several factors account for the reasons why many African students chose to pursue postgraduate programs in South Africa. This can be summarised to be affordability of tuition, availability of funding, quest for intra-continental collaborations, and availability of infrastructure. Science Guide (2013) describes the quality of education and research available in South African universities to be the unique point that distinguishes South Africa from other African countries:
This popularity of South Africa can be explained by two major advantages. On the one hand, the procedure for visas is less complex than in Europe or the United States. On the other hand, South Africa offers a lot of opportunities with a standard of living that is, although lower than in the EU or US, accessible, dynamic and stable.

Given the poor state of the socio-economic situation of the majority of countries in Africa, many students cannot afford the high tuition being charged by the Universities in Europe and America, especially when converting the amount to the local currency. South Africa then becomes the next destination for many students in Africa due to the affordability of tuition.

Another significant factor of attraction for African students to choose South Africa for postgraduate studies is the availability of funding to conduct research. In a bid to attract top research candidates from other African nations, South African universities have varieties of postgraduate bursaries for Masters and Doctoral candidates to undertake data collection or purchase equipment to facilitate a research project. For example, the University of Witwatersrand, one of the top rated South African universities, recently introduced a special fund to support international students for research. Coupled with this is a better service delivery from its international office, as well as a fee rebate system, aimed towards refunding full tuition for a postgraduate student who is able to complete a degree within the minimum time (ICEF, 2019).

Another factor is the level of infrastructural development in many South African universities which can compete favourably with those available in Europe and Americas. Unlike some of their counterparts in other African countries, many of the universities in South Africa can boast of functional and up-to-date science equipment and laboratories, world class libraries, and high-speed internet services, among others.

Meeting and networking with likeminded individuals for long-term social and professional collaborations is another reason why many international students chose to pursue postgraduate studies in South Africa. There is no doubt that studying in any South African university enables one a chance of meeting emerging and professional scholars, as well as young people of diverse backgrounds and cultures from different parts of the continent. This facilitates cultural enrichment, and it enables one to have the knowledge of what is going on around the continent.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Social Learning Theory

The researchers employ the social learning theory to underpin this study. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian educator and psychologist, propounded social learning theories in the year 1962 to explain the way the environment and social context influences the learning process of an individual. Vygotsky explains further the need for educators and providers of learning to understand how students learn in a social context and how teachers can build active learning communities that can accommodate students from different background and nationalities. The theory further emphasises that student learning is influenced both by the location or environment of learning as well as through their interactions and communications with others (Neff, 2019). Besides, Vygotsky (1962) opines that culture is the major deciding factor for knowledge construction. In other words, students learn through the cultural intercourse that results from their interaction with others. Vygotsky, therefore, implores educators and institutions of higher learning to prioritise learning activities based on collaboration or activities that build on each student's background, language, experience and skills shaped by each individual's cultural experience.

The implication of this theory to this study is that the international students’ learning experience in South African universities is greatly influenced both by the context of the university, and their interactions with peers who comes from different backgrounds and countries in Africa. The learning experience here may be direct or indirect. The theory also implies that the international students in South African universities seem to be under the strong influence of the politics and policies of the university where they find themselves, and which they have little or no control over. Meanwhile, the institutional policy or politics determine what experience the student would have, including in respect of their postgraduate research adventure.

METHODOLOGY

The study explored international postgraduate students’ experiences at a selected South African based university. The study was premised on the constructivism paradigm. Hence, a qualitative method was adopted. Kumar (2014), Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, and Bezuidenhout (2014) as well as Creswell (2014) opine that the qualitative method is best hinged on the constructivism paradigm and is most suitable in a study where in-depth information is needed about a phenomenon. Data was collected from 19 purposively selected postgraduate international students in a selected South African based university. A semi-structured interview was adopted for data collection using an interview schedule guide. The adoption of the semi-structured interview gave the researchers the
opportunity to ask additional questions based on responses of the participants. The retrieved data were coded into themes, and thereafter analysed.

RESULT

Results of the Demographic Data

The results of the demographic data of participants in the study are presented in the table below:

Insert Table 1: The demographic data of participants

Analysis of the demographic data collected from participants show that 61.9% of the participants are males, while 38.1% are females. This could be as a result of the ability of the male gender to travel to other countries of the world in pursuit of a better livelihood compared to the female gender. This is in contrast to the finding of Berg (2015) who opines that more females travel for abroad study. Also, the finding shows that while 14.3% of the participants are within the age range of 18-29, 66.7% are between 30-39 years of age, and 19% are 40 years and above. Additionally, the study shows that majority of the participants, precisely 52.4% have stayed between 3-4 years in South Africa, while 38.1% have stayed below 2 years in the country and 9.5% have stayed 5 years and above. Furthermore, the majority (90.5%) of the participants are from the West African region, while 9.5% are from the Southern African region. Participants in the study are people undertaking Honours, Masters and Doctoral programs. While 14.3% of the participants are undertaking Honours degrees, 19.0% are pursuing Masters degrees while 66.7% are in pursuit of Doctoral degrees. All faculties in the selected university were represented in the study. The percentage of participants from the Faculties of Agriculture and Science, and Arts are 38.1% respectively, while 9.5% are from the Faculty of Commerce, Admin and Law, and 14.3% are from the Faculty of Education. Table 1 shows a summary of the demography of participants.

Results from the qualitative Data

The findings of the study are presented following different questions and identified themes such as: security, funding, quality of provided education, adaptability, conducive environment and fee.
Security

Question: How secure do you feel within the campus?

The responses of majority of the respondents show that security is a major factor which makes many international students migrate from their countries to study in the selected South African university. Some of the responses of respondents with regards to the identified theme are presented below: “ISR” is used to mean International Student Respondent

ISR₁: I feel insecure in most cases because the university is porous to external intruders who may never spare you for any reason.

ISR₂: The campus is peaceful and secure as there are some measures put in place to ensure proper security.

ISR₁₃: I feel moderately secured.

ISR₄: When I am within campus I feel secure because of the presence of security in most areas on campus.

ISR₅: Humanly, I am 80% secure due to various news about issues of murder everywhere from primary school students to university students though here in UNIZULU, I think the institution is doing her best in term of security of both the students and workers.

ISR₁₇: Well, I don’t think I have problem with security. We are secured to large extent.

ISR₇: Quite secured, but as for living on campus, I haven’t lived on campus for once, I’m staying off campus and traveling to school every school day.

ISR₈: Fairly secured.

ISR₉: I feel secure very secure within the campus.

ISR₁₀: Averagely secured when there is relative peace on campus and largely unsecured when there is an uproar.

This finding of the study corroborates the report of National Academies of Sciences and Engineering and Medicine (2017) who opine that issues around insecurity is one of the reasons capable of making people leave their home countries in search of knowledge. According to
Uleanya (2019), learning cannot take place successfully in an environment beclouded with unrest. He further explains by citing examples of instances where campus unrests have disrupted teaching and learning activities and have led to setback for the students, lecturers, and institutions amongst others. Suffice to state that insecurity and various forms of unrest propel people to migrate from their home country to other nations to study.

**Funding**

*Question: Which amongst the following is your source of study finance (a) Self-sponsored (b) Home government/Employer funding (c) SA Bursary (D) Foreign country bursary (E) Others?*

The findings of the study sequel to the responses of respondents suggest that availability of funding is not a major reason for international students studying in the selected institution. For instance, out of 19 respondents, 12 admitted that they are self-sponsored, while 5 state that they have a bursary from the South African government, and 2 have funding from elsewhere. This finding is in contrast with the work of Tati (2010) who opine that availability of funding is a major reason why students migrate to different parts of the world to study. Piracha and Vadean (2013) holds the view that lack of funds is capable of hindering individuals from achieving academically as desired. The report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (2019) also supports the view of Piracha and Vadean (2013) that funding influences the migration of people from one part of the world to another in search of education.

**Quality of Education Provided**

*Question: How do you rate the quality of teaching and research activities with regards to your experiences here in this university?*

The finding of the study indicates that to a large extent, the quality of the level of education provided is one of the reasons why people leave their home country for South Africa. For instance, some of the responses of respondents on this theme are presented below:

**ISR9:** The quality is at average. Some mechanisms to ensure qualitative teaching and good research output are not in place or are inadequate for postgraduate especially

**ISR19:** The current quality of university education here in South Africa is high. I like that

**ISR8:** The quality of education is satisfactory
ISR12: I have the best research experience because I have all the support I require from my supervisors. Whenever I am stuck I call on my supervisors and they are able to assist at any time. Whenever I submit my work, they read and give timely feedback.

ISR11: The quality of teaching is good, as it requires on hand participation from students as well.

ISR7: The quality is good. For instance, some lecturers have passion for their duty, they are doing their best in term of quality teaching and research activities. Some are always available to be consulted or book an appointment with the students when they are less available.

ISR6: The quality is okay

ISR14: High quality

ISR15: The quality is very good

ISR18: I consider the quality of research activities in UNIZULU as satisfying international standard.

ISR2: It's okay and interesting, but it can be better

ISR5: I have support and encouragement from my supervisor, so for me, I am being well tutored and supervised. That makes the education to be of good quality

This finding from the study shows that quality in the level of education provided to students, will attract foreign nationals to a country. This coincides with the work of Aydin (2013) who holds the view that the quality of education provided in an institution of learning attracts people of different races, culture, backgrounds, amongst others. The 2019 report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) further suggests that the quality of education that is made available for citizens and foreign nationals promotes migration of people. This implies that people move from one place to another in search of quality education.

Adaptability

**Question: How easy was it for you to adjust to happenings in the nation and your study?**

Analysis of the collected data from respondents suggests that the ability for students to acclimatise with new environments also promotes movement of people from different countries in order to study. Some of the responses of the respondents are presented below:
ISR1: I had no problems at all because there are no much differences between my country and South Africa

ISR11: I never experienced any form of stress trying to cope or adjust. I can easily adjust anywhere

ISR9: It was so easy for me to adjust

ISR8: It was very easy for me to adjust. This probably may not be unconnected with the fact that the international students’ community here provides some stability for new entrants and helps them to adapt to the environment quite easily.

ISR4: Very easy to adjust to the environment.

ISR3: Adjusting was very easy

ISR16: I adapted quickly than I could imagine but I took me around 6 months to familiarize myself with the happening around campus.

ISR7: I found it easy to adjust to happenings in the nation and my study conveniently

ISR19: I did find it easy to adjust with the help of the seminars and workshops that were organised

ISR13: Not difficult for me after overcoming the initial fear of xenophobia

The findings of the study shows that international students find it easy to remain in South Africa and study because adapting and adjusting to the new environment was easy for them. This corroborates with the report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2019) which supports the notion that people move from one place to another owing to their level of adaptability. In other words, the ability of people to adapt easily to different environments promotes migration, especially with regards to movement of people in search of knowledge as is the case in this regard.
Conducive Environment

Question: What is your take on the academic environment?

People prefer to study in places where the environment is conducive and suitable for them. This is usually the case with international students when they compare where they intend studying to where they are living. Some of the responses of the respondents of this study are reported below:

ISR5: My experience has been very vibrant and conducive on my academic life, one can go to the lab, library, lecture room, and still get help and insight from other scholars as one can get from a lecturer.

ISR8: The academic environment is conducive to an extent

ISR12: For me the environment is comfortable for learning at least the use of Wi-Fi to enable one to fully get all the necessary materials needed for academic purpose and other.

ISR7: Quite friendly and engaging. It’s being engaging stems from the fact that workshops and symposia are regularly organized to improve research, teaching and learning.

ISR6: The academic environment is conducive for learning activities.

ISR4: The academic environment is relatively conducive

This finding of the study is an indication that one reason why international students in the selected university preferred to study in them compared to institutions in their home countries is based on the conducive nature of the environment. Hercog and van de Laar (2017) conducted similar study using India. Their finding shows that people who hold family-friendly environment in esteem are likely to remain behind. They further opine that people are more likely to migrate to different parts of the world to study as a result of the university and field of study rather than a conducive environment.
Tuition

Question: How affordable is the tuition/accommodation in this university to you?

Another factor considered by international students when attempting to migrate for study in different parts of the world is the tuition fee. With regards to the identified theme (fee), some of the responses of the respondents are as presented:

ISR1: The tuition is affordable and it met the standard of what was on ground. apart from the accommodation which needs state of emergence

ISR18: The fee is moderately affordable.

ISR3: The tuition/accommodation is quite affordable

ISR9: The tuition is moderately okay

ISR15: The fee is very much affordable

ISR12: The tuition I would say is somewhat affordable but the accommodation prices are way too high.

ISR11: It’s affordable

ISR10: Reasonably affordable. I believe the fees charged by the University are not “cutthroat.”

ISR17: It’s not much costly as a University

ISR14: I find the tuition/accommodation in the university affordable

This finding of the study shows that affordability of fees is one of the reasons why international students in the selected university chose to study in the institution. This finding aligns with the work of Brezis (2017) who holds the view that the tuition fee charged by institutions is a determining factor for international students to travel in search of higher degree qualifications. This implies that people can choose to emigrate from their countries of origin if the tuition charged in institutions situated in other parts of the world, is affordable by them. However, where the reverse is the case, the issue of emigration remains impossible to some.
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this present study show that there are factors motivating international students to explore studying abroad, precisely the selected South African based university. These factors include: adaptability, conducive environment, security, tuition fee, and quality of education provided. However, availability of funding is a major factor militating against the migration of international postgraduate students to study in the selected South African based university. The finding on adaptability being a factor which supports the migration of international postgraduate students to study in the selected university contrasts the work of Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015), who opine that international students encounter challenges which make it difficult for them to adapt to their new environment in pursuit of a higher education degree outside their home countries. The finding of the work of Khanal and Gaulee (2019) shows that international students experience challenges trying to adapt to new environments of study due to certain factors such as lack of accurate and adequate information, language issues, finance as well as cultural differences.

One of the findings of this present research suggests that the availability of a conducive environment is another factor which motivates postgraduate international students to migrate to study in the selected university. This finding coincides with the works of Uleanya (2019) and Neff (2019) who hold the view that a conducive environment influences the learning abilities of students. Hence, students will migrate in search of conducive environment to study. Meanwhile, according to the proponent of Social Learning Theory (SLT) Vygotsky (1962), the environment in which students study has a great influence on learning abilities. Similarly, the study shows that in addition to a conducive environment, security is a major factor which motivates postgraduate students to travel to the selected university in search of higher education qualification. This finding agrees with the work of Uleanya (2019) who avers that security aids a conducive environment which in turn promotes quality teaching and learning activities. Additionally, another finding of the study indicates that the tuition fee motivates students to emigrate from their home countries to the selected South African university to study. This finding coincides with the work of Brezis (2017) who holds the view that the tuition fee is a factor for foreign nationals to study in countries of their choice. Also, the quest for quality education is a factor which makes postgraduate students migrate to other parts of the world other than their country of origin. This finding corroborates the report of the Science Guide (2013) which describes the quality of education and research available in South African universities as unique. This implies that students migrate from various parts of the world in order to experience the unique nature of the quality of higher education available in South Africa. On the contrary, the finding of the study indicates funding is not a factor which propels students to migrate to South Africa in search of higher education qualification. The report of ICEF, (2019) states that postgraduate students who are able to complete their degrees within a stipulated minimum time enjoy a refund of their tuition. This suggests that the students are not
funded at the commencement or during the course of their study. Hence, this aligns with the finding that postgraduate international students are not motivated to study in the selected South African university owing to availability of funds.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined the experiences of the international postgraduate students in a South African university. No doubt, the Republic of South Africa is contributing immensely to human capital development of the continent, especially by offering qualitative postgraduate education and research experience to thousands of African students and those from other continents of the world. Meanwhile, it must be noted here that all participants in the study came from different countries in Africa to study in South Africa.

There were positive responses from the participants regarding the adaptability to the study environment, quality of education received, security on campus and affordability of tuition. However, it was noted in the analysis that despite the availability of different funding programs for postgraduate studies in South Africa, the majority of the international students that participated in the study could not secure funding to run their programs, as many indicated self-sponsorship as the source of funding for their postgraduate program in the university. Universities in South Africa are, therefore, encouraged to introduce more funding opportunities to international students as a way of attracting the interest of those who would like to study in South Africa but are limited by funding. Also, South African higher education institutions can establish different endowment funds in honour of the notable wealthy individuals within the continent such as MO Ibrahim and Aliko Dangote, among others. The donations made into such endowment wallets could be used to sponsor indigent students from different parts of Africa to study and conduct research in South African universities.

SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDY

The study was restricted to only African nationals in the selected university. Hence, it is suggested that similar study be conducted extending to nationals from across various continents of the world.
REFERENCES


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