

HOME AWAY FROM HOME? - AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Background

International students are defined as students, usually in early adulthood, who study in foreign educational schools and universities (wordIQ 2010). According to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), international students are those who travel to a country different from their own for the purpose of tertiary study (SOPEMI 2010). Some students travel abroad solely or mainly to improve their language skills, while for others it is to advance their specialised studies (wordIQ 2010). For students in developing countries, travelling abroad to study may be because suitable tertiary education is either in short supply or unavailable altogether in their home countries. In addition, in many parts of the world, a foreign degree, especially if earned from certain countries, is honoured more than a local one.

Recent studies and surveys report that there has been a huge growth in ¹foreign students studying in South African (SA) universities (MacGregor 2007; ASSAf 2010). According to MacGregor (2007:1), "international students at SA's 23 public universities quadrupled since 1994 from 12,557 to 53,733 in 2006." Two out of three of the international students in SA universities are from the 14 member Southern African Development Community (SADC), with Zimbabwe as the major "source" country, followed by Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. The numbers of students from non-SADC African countries also nearly doubled during the period 2001 to 2006 (MacGregor (2007:1).

The factors which have significantly influenced the move towards SA universities by students from the rest of the continent are: the close proximity of the geographical region, historical connections, language, the perceived high quality of education, accessibility, affordability, and high employability rate of SA graduates in their home countries. A major factor for most African students is the lower cost of living and lower tuition fees in South Africa (SA) when compared to those of developed countries. Because of bilateral agreements with SADC countries, SADC students are subsidised at the same level as local students in SA public universities (MacGregor 2007; McLellan 2009).

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Why distinguish between continental students and other international students?

In this context, African students are students who come from African countries and who are natives of any of the countries of Africa, or descendants of any of the peoples of Africa. In the SA context, the classification "African" refers to the group of people who are of African ancestry and who are classified "black" in colour, but not coloured, or Indian.

African international students have been chosen because they form the majority of international students discussed in this paper. Earlier it was stated that the numbers of students from the African continent studying in SA universities have increased significantly over the last decade because of, among other reasons, the close proximity of the country geographically, historical connections and language. These are factors that would seemingly make it easy for this group of international students to find (studying in) SA a "home away from home." These students also mainly belong to the same race as the majority of South Africans. It

¹ In this paper, the terms "international" and "foreign" students are used interchangeably.

would, therefore, seem to be easy for them to blend in, and be like locals. However, there is evidence that because of home languages and histories, which are often different from those of the locals, they may be viewed as, and also feel, different. In the wider society, there have also been notorious incidents of xenophobia widely covered in media, whereby Africans from outside SA have been the targets of xenophobic attacks. The incidents which have been covered by media mainly affected lower socio-economic classes, and those Africans who stayed in historically black residential areas such as townships. It was, therefore, deemed of interest to find out whether the students under study here felt threatened as a result, and if they had actually been directly affected by xenophobia.

The large number of African students, who are also black in colour, in the SA universities, has also boosted the number of black students in the country graduating with PhDs. In the 2010 PhD study (ASSAf 2010:16) it is reported that, "Significant improvements observed in terms of racial representation among doctoral graduates may be offset by similar increases in the number of non-South African graduates."

The representation of non-South Africans is highest among black graduates, especially in engineering sciences, material, and technologies where only 36% of doctoral graduates in 2007 were South African nationals. This suggests that the dramatic increase in the share of black graduates in this field is largely the result of an intake of students from elsewhere on the African continent. (ASSAf 2010: 49)

At the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), when a new Act was promulgated in 2008, the inclusion in the HSRC staff compliment of African scholars, including interns, became compulsory, and this formed part of performance indicators for the various Research Units. The following objective, "help build research capacity and infrastructure for the human sciences in the Republic and elsewhere in the Africa," resulted in a quota being set for the appointment of research interns from the continent. The HSRC management then decided on a ratio of 75% and 25% for interns from SA and those from other African countries respectively. The requirement for interns to be registered students at a local university, however, excludes many African students from participating. Students who cannot be accommodated are those who are applying while still at home, and who would come to SA to work as interns, and those already registered as full-time students, attending regular classes, and cannot be based at the research council. In some instances, these prospective interns, just like the local students, would register for higher degrees if they were offered paid internship positions, such that students, especially local ones, register for higher degrees because they have been promised or offered paid internships on condition that they study, not that they really want to pursue the higher degrees.

In the 2010 ASSAf PhD study referred to earlier, it is reported that one third of non-South African doctoral students who were studying in SA during the time of the study, intended to stay in SA after graduation, compared to a very small number of SA national graduates who intended to migrate to other countries (ASSAf 2010). This therefore has a potential of changing the profile of SA graduates and academics.

While the increase of international students in the SA universities may be credited for the educational gains in the SA society – the increase in the number of black graduates, and the expressed intention of non-SA PhD graduates to stay in SA after graduation, and therefore contribute economically - the phenomenon has not been without problems, controversy or contestation. There are perceptions in SA that the universities, especially the historically white universities, are admitting the international black students so as to meet the admission quotas they have been set for black students. A preference for non-SA black students over local black students is a result of the observation that the non-SA students tend to be more academically prepared and stronger than the local black students, and therefore, the universities do not have to spend copious amounts of resources in remedial and academical development of underprepared students. Giving first preference to non-SA black students would be defeating the purpose of redress programmes aimed at the historically disadvantaged and excluded SA students which the government quotas serve.

If the African graduates stay in SA after graduation as indicated, this would be a loss to the African countries they came from. It would seem then that while all African countries, including SA, have always had the challenge of brain drain – losing its educated nationals mainly to the western countries, SA is now moving into the category of predator countries.

South Africans and Africa

The relationship between SA and Africa, or South Africans and Africans is a complex one. South Africans of all racial groups and socio-economic classes, but especially from the uneducated and lower socio-economic classes, tend to be ignorant of the continent and generally display a superiority complex over other Africans. The position of South Africans in relation to the African continent, can be described in general terms, as one of misalignment, dislocation, detachment, disinformation and ignorance (on the South Africans' side). South Africans of all races and all classes have been heard to refer to those from the continent but outside of SA as "Africans," and when referring to travel from SA into the greater continent or from any African country into SA as "coming from" and "going to" Africa, implying that SA is not part of the African continent. In reference to fellow South Africans, South Africans struggle with the term "African." For purposes of redress targeting the historically disadvantaged groups, the post-1994 SA Equality Laws classify South Africans into Africans, Coloureds and Indians (all these historically disadvantaged black groups), and white people. The term "African" somehow is contentious when referring to South Africans, such that, in use, it is frequently qualified = "Black Africans," while no other qualifier or colour is used with the term to justify this distinction (Mda 2010).

MINI STUDY

For this paper I conducted a mini study to investigate the experiences of African international students in SA universities. The study focused on graduate students from the African continent, but obviously from outside SA, who are currently studying in any one of the SA universities. My starting place for the selection of these students was to be the HSRC where I work, following the promulgation of the 2008 HSRC Act which requires that 25% of the interns must be non-SA Africans.

Focus group interviews of non-SA postgraduate students from the continent

I decided to start by interviewing the African students who are interns at my workplace. I sent the interns emails explaining the project and inviting them to participate in a focus group interview. In the end, there were 5 students in the focus group, 4 of them in Pretoria in the same room as the interviewer, while the 5th one was on the telephone in Durban. Later, another student, based in our Durban office, was sent the questions electronically and responded electronically. I also sent email to three non-SA students in the SA universities, who were not interns at our organisation, but whom I had met a few weeks before at a conference. Only one responded electronically to my questions a few weeks later.

Expansion of the participant group

A few weeks before the Monash conference, I travelled from Pretoria to a conference in Durban for "women in research." On the way to the conference venue I chatted with a female lecturer from another university, whom I had not seen for quite some time, and coincidentally the colleague started talking about discriminatory practices by academics and management at her university, especially against black academics and students. I then raised the question of non-SA, African students. I report on this later.

As I continued chatting to others, formally and informally, about the phenomenon of African international students and SA Africans, it was becoming clear to me that there were views and opinions on each of these groups, and the different experiences each group seemed to have in the universities.

At one of the recent academic conferences I found myself in conversation with a non-SA lecturer from one of the neighbouring countries. I started the discussion of experiences of non-South Africans in SA, especially in the academic setting. I include his observations in my report later.

After the focus group interview with the African international students, the electronic survey to the non-SA students, talking to the SA female academic and the non-SA academic, I decided to ask a few SA students their views on the non-SA students. These were also students who were interns at my workplace. Four participated.

Interview and electronic questions for African international students

<p>Why SA?</p> <p>How much did you know about SA before coming?</p> <p>Did you find it different from what you expected?</p> <p>Are there differences in academic culture?</p> <p>Are there differences in student culture?</p> <p>Are you treated differently by academic staff?</p> <p>Do you feel different from SA students or is this a non-issue?</p> <p>What have you learnt about SA education now that you are here?</p> <p>What do you think would be SA students' experience if they went to study in your country?</p>
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Question for SA students on African international students

<p>Have you been in classes at the university with students from the African continent?</p> <p>Are they easy to spot/identify? If yes, why?</p> <p>Are you friends with any students from the African continent, but not from SA? If not, why not?</p> <p>Do they exhibit a different academic culture from SA students?</p> <p>Do they exhibit a different social culture from SA students?</p> <p>Are they treated differently from African students from SA by academic staff?</p> <p>Why do you think these students come to SA, and do you support their coming to study here?</p> <p>Would you consider studying in another African country? Why?</p> <p>Any thoughts you would like to share on this subject apart from answering the above questions?</p>

Responses from African international students on studying in SA

1. Why SA?

The following were the most common answers. These answers are similar to those reported by McGregor (2007); Kishun (2008); and McLellan (2009).

- South Africa is close to home.
- There were no similar courses at home.
- No bursary for overseas studies was available.
- SADC students do not pay the foreigners' levy, but instead are subsidized like local students.
- The SA universities have a reputation of high standard of higher education
- There was the allure of post-apartheid SA.
- There was a desire to leave home and be independent, far from the parents' eyes.

One student from Lesotho reported that during his time there were no postgraduate studies in Lesotho and so he knew he would have to pursue his postgraduate studies outside his country. He secured an overseas scholarship but because he had met someone he loved in his country, and planned to marry and start a family soon, he did not want to go far away from home in case he lost the loved one. He then decided on SA which is close to Lesotho, so he could visit home at least every month. He did an internet search on the SA universities and checked how they were rated worldwide. He also had an opportunity to visit two SA universities before coming to study in SA, one a historically black university and the other a historically Afrikaans university, and he did not like both.

Another student, also from Lesotho, did not have a bursary for overseas studies. She easily chose SA as an alternative because she had noticed that, unlike in the past, those who had studied overseas did not have an advantage over those who studied in the continent, such as in SA. She said overseas was "no longer the gold." Those with SA degrees got employment positions as easily as those who had studied overseas. The students also reported that the governments of the neighbouring countries were offering more scholarships to study in SA than overseas. This was the case in Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

A student from Zimbabwe had completed her Honours degree in Zimbabwe and was keen to pursue her masters' degree inside or outside her country. She applied to universities in Botswana, SA and Zimbabwe. Ultimately she decided on SA for economic reasons. Her husband was already working in SA because the Zimbabwean economy had "gone sour," so she decided they would save money if they shared accommodation in SA. It was only when she came to SA that she learnt about the University of Pretoria where she studied.

2. How much they knew about SA before coming to SA

All 5 students who participated in the focus group knew a few universities in SA before coming to SA. The two students who answered questions electronically did not know about SA universities. One of the two was not coming specifically to study, but for opportunities she was told existed here. She had been told that as a foreigner she was assured of a teaching position at least. The other one knew nothing about SA universities and all she knew about SA was what she saw in media or tourist magazines. Since her home is in Mauritius, Durban in KwaZulu-Natal Province was the nearest place for her to study.

Those who knew of the SA universities each sent applications to more than one university. The choice was then made on the basis of more affordable fees, where one got admitted, or, in one case, on the basis of a recommendation made by a homegirl already studying in SA.

3. Was SA different from what they expected?

The Nigerian student, who came to SA because of opportunities she had heard of, found the situation very different here, because she had not known of the various permits she would need as a foreigner. She found out on arrival that first of all she needed to legalise her stay in the country before she could be employed, and getting the legal stay permission was not easy.

One student stated that there is a difference between visiting the country and living in the country. She learned about the transport system, the government bodies and the apartheid history.

Other students had not found anything strikingly different from what they had expected.

4. Are there differences in academic culture?

The students all found the academic environment supportive to students' studies. They all reported much much more student resources in the SA universities than in universities back home. The resources which were mentioned were easy access to computers/computer labs, tutoring, bursaries, and opportunities to attend conferences. One student from Zimbabwe reported that in Zimbabwe lectures and tutorials were compulsory for undergraduate students, whereas in the SA university where she is, tutorials are optional. Apparently this was not the common thing as others reported that in the SA universities where they were, tutorials were compulsory for undergraduates. They all perceived the standard of higher education in SA to be very high. It must be mentioned that all the students in this study go to historically white universities, which, therefore, have always been advantaged. The experience is probably very different in historically black universities, especially those in the rural areas.

When asked to share specific personal academic experiences, one of those studying in a historically Afrikaans university, jumped at the opportunity and immediately said, "The language was a big issue!" This student from Zimbabwe is currently studying for a doctoral degree and had completed the master's degree at the same university. Her masters' classes were supposed to be in English, unlike the undergraduate studies which could be offered in English or Afrikaans. In class a student would ask a question in Afrikaans and a lecturer would respond in Afrikaans for about 5 minutes and then in one line translate to English what he'd said in Afrikaans. The non-Afrikaans-speaking students would feel left out in such instances. There was only one lecturer who did not want Afrikaans to be used in class insisting that everyone must be included.

Regarding work ethic, they all felt that the South Africans did not push themselves as hard as the non-South Africans. One student felt it was because in SA people with Honours degrees could get very good jobs, but for them back home they needed to have masters degrees at least to secure good jobs.

5. Are there differences in student culture?

They all felt there were differences. The following were observations from the foreign students:

- SA students are more involved in extra-curricular activities; there's night life and students are involved in many student organisations. There are students' national organisations, such as a Mauritian Club and Zimbabwean society.
- SA students are more liberated in dress and highly fashionable compared to Zimbabwean students. Students from Zimbabwe adapt while in SA, by being liberal in dress but they leave their short pants and mini dresses in SA when they go home.
- South Africans are more accepting of foreigners - "at home foreigners are not treated kindly" (Zim)

- SA undergraduate students are not as hardworking as non- South Africans.
- "I was shocked by the lack of respect for elders here." This is a reference to students addressing lecturers and professors by first name. (Someone mentioned that it was difficult, for instance, to address me (the interviewer) by name, and they all agreed they could not call me by name and so call me "Prof." I told them I understood, and also felt very uncomfortable when a young person called me by name, without using "Sisi" or "Ousie" (= sister) before my name. I shared with them that I have become even comfortable with being called "Mme" = mother in Sesotho.)
- A Zimbabwean was shocked by the familiarity of South Africans. She was shocked and even uncomfortable by all the hugging amongst people.
- The students noticed that SA students mixed almost exclusively with people of their own race. Even in class the students would sit only next to people of their own race.

6. Are you treated differently from local students by academic staff?

None of the students felt they were treated differently by academic staff. One student said the lecturers just preferred diligent students.

One Zimbabwean student reported that some South Africans felt that Zimbabwean students were favoured and were given higher marks than locals. The Zimbabwean student refuted the claim. He conceded that there were lecturers who had favourites but the favourites could be South African and from any race.

7. Do you feel different from SA students or is this a non-issue?

For the students from Lesotho this definitely was not an issue. One even stated that she had been surprised that I had invited her as a foreign student because she does not think of herself as a foreign student. This is because of their home language, Sesotho, being one of the SA official languages. Being in Pretoria where Sepedi or Northern Sotho is predominantly spoken, makes them blend easily because their language is close to Sepedi and Setswana which is also commonly spoken in Gauteng Province where Pretoria is. For one of the Sotho students, however, this had not always been easy because he started his studies in KZN and he could not understand isiZulu.

For the Zimbabweans, the Mauritian and the Nigerian, not speaking the local languages made them feel different. This was especially difficult off-campus. One Zimbabwean student narrated how he had struggled to obtain information about local taxis because he could only ask in English. An observation by one of the Zimbabweans was that because at postgraduate level he is among many foreign students, English is the commonly used language, and that limits the chances of learning a local language. He felt this was a pity.

A personal observation from the Mauritian student was:

I am very different from the SA students in many ways. For instance, I take a lot of unnecessary risks at night here in SA which many locals would not take. For instance, me and my housemate (she is from Zimbabwe) would often walk late at night at 3 in the morning. Also, I don't hang around with specific race or religious group. I'm also aware of the different cultures around the world while many of the locals are not. I am also more willing to learn of new cultures and broaden my general knowledge; I believe this increases my acceptance levels of other culture groups. Whereas for many locals, it is still very hard for them to accept that I dress differently, or I cook differently etc.

This student's response confirmed my beliefs about differences between locals and foreigners. I was surprised that this response had not come out from the bigger group, or at least not as clearly. I will come back to this in my summary.

8. What have you learnt about South African education now that you are here?

All of them stated that the standard of education is very high, which confirmed what they believed or perceptions they held about the SA education system before coming into the country. One of the students stated that since coming to SA she had also been involved in teaching at a local secondary school. Her assessment was that at tertiary level education was very good, especially when there was "a big group of international students attending (UCT for instance)," but that the same could not be said of the rural universities in terms of facilities and services offered, and the public schools. To her, the best schools were the private ones, with more extracurricular activities and trained teachers. The Mauritian also observed that in SA education "is a privilege for the underprivileged" which was in contrast to the situation in Mauritius where the best schools were the free government schools.

Another student said SA education focuses mostly on what a student needs to study, and not irrelevant stuff. She thought that lecturers, especially in her field, Science, had heavy workloads, which could be a result of limited numbers of lecturers mostly in the Science field, as they always seemed very busy. It was not clear whether this was in reference to undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

9. What do you think would be South African students' experience if they went to study in your country?

A number of them thought South Africans would not enjoy the experience, for different reasons. One student responded by comparing that to getting out of a luxurious life to try out a pauper's life. Obviously this student's description of studying in an SA university was based on her experience of studying in a highly resourced, historically advantaged university.

The Mauritian referred to both the academic life and the socio-cultural life. According to her South Africans would find it difficult to live in her country where race is not an issue. South Africans would be shocked (in a pleasant way, I must say) by the safety level of Mauritius, the free and safe transport for all students and elderly citizens. Education is also free and efficient in her country.

The Nigerian thought South Africans would find life outside their country strenuous, because they did not go out [of the country] a lot. Being away from their families and cultures might be stressful at first but they would eventually cope.

Responses from the other participant groups

On whether the African internationals were easy to identify, as opposed to local Africans, the respondents said it was only when they spoke that one heard the distinct accents when speaking English, otherwise they were not different.

When the two students, who said the African international students exhibit a different social culture, were asked to expatiate, one said the "older generation (45+) tend to interact more with people from their home countries and less with locals when they are studying here, [whereas the] younger generation tend to be more accepting and embracing of the 'so-called' South African culture." The other student said what was distinct about the foreign Africans is the respect they have for every individual, most importantly women, which was different from the behaviour of his South African friends. This South African said his continental friends "did not have multiple partners or girlfriends/boyfriends ... and they always critiqued this notion of multiple partners." This view, interestingly, had been articulated by a Nigerian female student during the chat I had with students at the KZN conference a few weeks before. The Nigerian student was explaining why she and her country mates did not date South Africans.

Local students did not think the foreign Africans were treated differently by academics, or at least did not admit that if they thought so. The SA lecturer, on the other hand, was convinced the African international students were favoured. She became animated as she described the preferential treatment the non-SA African students got, and how unfairly the local African students were treated and viewed. She also added that the admission of the non-SA students was mainly to meet the race quota requirements.

The non-SA African lecturer reported that he had SA and non-SA students, and that the former were not as successful as the latter group. The man stated that usually when they had academic outings or fieldwork, especially during weekends, most local students did not go on the trips. His explanation was that the local students had too many commitments and obligations which foreign students did not have. These could be participation in family/relatives' funerals and other such functions. I wasn't sure if he was being genuine or was being a gracious guest (to the host country). This could, of course, be one explanation for the underperformance of local students when compared to Africans from outside SA.

There are other instances and contexts where the local students are seen to be either underperforming or to be slack towards studies. For instance, the organisation I work for has an agreement with the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) to collaborate in promoting research in the continent. One of CODESRIA's programmes is the annual regional Research Methodology Workshop offered to doctoral students free of charge. Invitations are sent out for research project summaries and the best students are chosen. What has happened in the past is that in Southern Africa, the SA contingency has been made up on actually non-SA students studying in SA universities. Apparently few applications come from SA nationals, and since selection is purely on merit, the few SA nationals may not be selected. The last two years CODESRIA has reported that response from Southern Africa was so poor that the regional workshop for Southern Africa was cancelled, and instead the two or three successful Southern African applicants were transferred to the East Africa regional workshop. As a research collaboration partner, CODESRIA has asked my organisation to assist with sending out invitations to the appropriate people and universities in SA, so that the services offered by CODESRIA reach people who need them.

Explanations for the high visibility of non-South Africans as opposed to South Africans in these endeavours is that, the non-South Africans have developed survival skills where there are limited resources, and that even being in these SA universities is a result of being resourceful. Another explanation is that, the non-South African students who are in SA are high achievers, and that is also why they have made it through meritorious, competitive admission processes of the local universities. As high-achievers, it is to be expected that their applications, to funding programmes such as CODESRIA's, will be strong. South Africans, on the other hand, are at home, in a comfort zone, and do not seem to have developed survival skills, because they have not had to scrounge for few resources. In some instances, others claim that black students, especially, are used to being given preferential treatment, as a result of redress policies such as affirmative action, race quotas and so on.

The last explanation was shared by the non-SA students I chatted with at a conference in KZN. They were scathing in their attacks on local students, stating that the locals were spoilt and missed a lot of opportunities which are available. In fact, one of these foreign Africans had recently completed her doctoral studies and was currently working as an academic. She was so pushy and made sure she introduced herself to people she deemed very important at the conference, such as the keynote speakers or government representatives, admitting that this was for advancing her career. It struck me that I, the only South African in the group, but also the most senior, seemed to be the only one who recoiled at this woman's behaviour and was clearly embarrassed as we watched her in action on the last day.

SUMMARY

From the students' reports, it was found that the factors which make the experience of studying away from home feel like being at home were the following:

Language – If the international student understood the locally-spoken language(s) then it is possible to feel like being at home. The students from Lesotho, for instance, do not feel like being outside their home country, especially in the South African Provinces where their home language, Sesotho sa Borwa (South Sotho), is commonly spoken. This sentiment was shared by the students from Botswana, studying at Monash University, and with whom I chatted at the conference.

The Zimbabweans in the group felt alienated because of their home language, Shona. They conceded that, Zimbabweans from Matebeleland, who spoke isiNdebele, a language originating in SA, and also one of the SA official languages, would be

linguistically comfortable in SA. Not only is isiNdebele one of the official languages in SA, but it belongs to the big Nguni language group which includes isiZulu, isiXhosa and SiSwati, which then makes it easy for a Ndebele person to fit in, in many Provinces in SA.

One of the students from Zimbabwe, studying in KwaZulu-Natal, observed that while speaking a local language would make the stay more comfortable, being in a postgraduate programme at the university, with many other international students, lessened the pressure to learn a local language, because most interactions were with people who spoke English. He felt this was a pity.

Similar history and familiar culture – Apart from speaking a common language, nationals who share a history or close history, and similar or very close cultures also feel at home in one another's countries. In the case of SA, for instance, Namibians and South Africans share a common history of being under apartheid rule for more than 40 years. The two countries therefore share a history of apartheid policies, and having Afrikaans as the government's enforced language. Of course, Namibia also has a history of German rule and its present culture reflects German influences. With English being a new language for Namibians – introduced and made official after Namibia's 1990 independence – many Namibians are most at home in SA in Afrikaans-speaking environments.

SA, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana and Zimbabwe were British colonies or British protectorates, and therefore all have British influences in their current education and cultural systems. SA also shares borders with all these neighbouring countries which makes it very common for residents and citizens of each country to move in and out of SA and these countries. Many children from Lesotho attend school on a daily basis across the border, in the SA town of Ficksburg, and Basotho also do their shopping in SA towns. The Basotho students, therefore, were very familiar with SA, even before they registered in the SA universities, and all report having visited or done shopping on a regular basis across the border.

As a student in a foreign country, the USA, in the 1990s, I had also experienced the closeness of students who shared a colonial history, and a colonial language, even over those whose countries shared borders. In our situation, for instance, students from Senegal (West Africa), a former French colony, were closest, in interactions and friendships, to students from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire then), another French colony, in Central Africa, rather than the students from neighbour countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia or Ghana. Among the West Africans, Senegalese associated more with students from Togo and Cote d' Ivoire, other former French colonies.

Big community of foreign students, therefore a common language of communication

The presence, and, in fact, increasing number, of international students in the universities is making it easier for foreign students to feel comfortable away from home. These students may not necessarily be close to local students, but sharing the experience of being foreign with many others, and sharing the language of communication and of learning, English, makes it easier to adapt away from home. As one of the students in my focus group reported, out of 10 African students in their postgraduate studies, 8 would be non-South African, and therefore being in the majority lessened the feeling of being foreign.

I have established that students form "National students' Associations" in their universities and towns. The students I interviewed reported that there was, for instance, a Mauritian Club at the University of Cape Town, and a Zimbabwean Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The Mauritian student in KwaZulu-Natal was a regular at the Zimbabwean Society functions.

During my days as an international student in the US I also was a member, and even later the President of the All Africa Students' Association, but also got together regularly with SA students, not only in my university, but in other local universities. When we got together we always prepared SA food, either made from home products we had "imported," or from American products, but prepared the SA way. Southern Africans shared most foods and ways of cooking, and also the sense of dress.

The ability and willingness to blend in

Some of the students I spoke to said for the international Africans to feel at home in SA, they “need[ed] to loosen up” otherwise the foreign African students tended to be uptight. A Zimbabwean student and a Nigerian student found SA students to be carefree. One may again refer to the case of the Basotho, who have experiences of coming in and out of the SA regularly, and whose home language is also a home language to approximately 4 million South Africans (South Africa.info 2010). These students reported not regarding themselves as foreigners in SA.

The Mauritian student, who obviously looks like South Africans of Indian origins, was seen as a local in Durban, where the population is predominantly of Indian origins. This could have been a benefit in that she looked local, but then she did not share the history of the local Indian-South Africans, and had a problem with being classified “Indian” when she had no heritage links with India or Indians. Being regarded as “Indian” was a problem when people who thought she was one of them found out she was not, and had different culture and history from them, and could not relate to the obsession with one’s colour which resulted in divisions among the people of the same country. Obviously in her case she felt closer to the foreign Zimbabweans than the local Indians, because she was an outsider.

ISSUES IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

From the above study and my experience as a foreigner or international student in a foreign country, the issues that emerge are:

Sense of belonging

The experience of foreign study is influenced positively or negatively by whether the student feels a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging may come from having similarities with the locals or feeling at home in the local environment, but also from having a community of foreigners who share your differences and frustrations in the foreign land, and also speak the same language you speak, English in this instance. In the latter situation, the international student therefore feels a strong sense of belonging to the international community.

Confusing identity/identity crisis

In both the SA and the USA situation (but also apparently in the Australian situation as shared at the conference) race always becomes a big factor. The local racial classifications, for example, “Black”; “Indian”; “people of colour”; “racial minority” may be foreign and offensive to the foreigner being classified thus. In my study the Mauritian stated:

In the 18 years that I have spent in Mauritius, nowhere have they ever asked me, ‘What is your race group?’ It was actually confusing for me when I first came to SA and they categorized me as an ‘Indian,’ as, for me, an Indian is a person who is from India ... but I was [not].

As a South African, who grew up where race was the hallmark of the apartheid policy and the kind of life one would lead being determined by the racial classification, I have always been familiar with racial politics, and knew my place racially. I was surprised, however, when I was in the US to find that I belonged to the same group as all “people of colour.” In my country, being coloured and being black were not necessarily the same thing. In the SA major racial division, where people are either black or white, coloured people were black. Then, among the black people, there was a category of coloured people and just plain black or African people, and I belonged to the latter, which was and still is the numerically majority group. In the US I was black, a person of colour, African, foreigner and one of the numerical minorities. I understand then how disconcerting it must be to Africans coming to SA, to find that they are regarded as foreigners in the African continent, and that they are classified as black, as opposed to being Nigerian, Mosotho or Mauritian, with all the trappings that go with that racial classification.

Local group stratifications (respected or low)

As a foreigner one finds out that not only does one have a racial classification one may have never known, there is a pre-determined status for people like you, or some stereotypical beliefs about people from your country or continent. Looking like an Indian in SA may make you look, and be treated, like a local, but then you also then assume the historical status of your new group, and being a SA Indian means you are historically disadvantaged whether you appreciate that or not, and that may be very uncomfortable if you have always been privileged and enjoyed the dignity of all humans.

As a foreign student in the US, I quickly learned that even amongst the foreigners, Far East Asians, especially Japanese, had a higher status than Africans or Caribbeans. Again that could be disconcerting to the lower-status foreigner, but in my case, this was not different from the classification back at home, and so this did not shock me, except to make me conclude that Africans or people of African origins seemingly always occupy the lowest rank anywhere in the world.

I am aware that this discomfort with one's classification is not only for those associated with historical disadvantage, but may also be equally, if not more, unnerving, to those who suddenly assume benefit and privilege by virtue of their colour. A white international student, for instance, may not only find her/himself suddenly belonging to a privileged group, but on the downside may be deemed to have been unfairly advantaged over others because of her/his race, and also may be linked to previous oppressors, also just by virtue of one's colour.

Understanding and appreciation of local history and dynamics

A requirement that I could also refer to as a universal rule, is for a foreigner to learn and appreciate the local history, and the local dynamics, without judging the locals. It is also important not to take sides in any divisions in the local society, or at least not to be vocal on one's views on the locals. A tendency, sometimes, especially in the SA situation, is for the African internationals, who have not experienced apartheid, to easily dismiss the eternal wounds as a result of the previous unjust system. The foreigners see a new SA, the world icon Mandela's political organisation, the African National Congress (ANC), whose members are predominantly black, being in power, and assume that all now is well. The fact that all races are now attending same universities, which may be headed by black Principals, suggests that all is equal, and to the foreigners, the inequalities have been removed and now everyone has an equal chance of succeeding. This assumption is, of course, naïve.

Construction of society (physically and virtually) - Many African societies are not racially constructed, and any observable racial divisions may be between Africans and non-Africans. Class divisions do exist, but in terms of race and language, most African societies are homogeneous. The SA society is, of course, not one of those. In addition to the class divisions there are also racial divisions, and the two may coincide. As a result of the continuing inequalities, including the type of education accessed by different groups, it is students from certain groups and certain classes who manage to get into postgraduate programmes, especially in historically advantaged universities, which may also be world-class universities. Locals understand the challenges faced by students from specific socio-economic classes, also from specific residential and geographical areas, in accessing education offered in these universities. As the Mauritian observed, SA students would be surprised to find that in Mauritius education is not a privilege, but free, together with the health system, and that transport for students is free. Often international students have no appreciation of the unequal construction.

The subtle divisions and classifications may escape visitors and international students, who have no real understanding of language and racial politics. In SA, for instance, the coloured people predominantly (79.5%) speak Afrikaans as a home language (SouthAfrica.Info 2010), and yet are historically a disadvantaged group. It should not be surprising therefore, if their registration numbers, are found to be low in the university postgraduate programmes, even when the main language of learning is Afrikaans. That nuance may escape foreigners who may not even notice that there is an underrepresented group in their university classes.

Universities' redress mandates

As a redress measure, SA universities are required to ensure representation of all racial groups in admitting students to the universities. This means that admission cannot be limited to merit only. For truly representative student populations, universities get some subsidies. This requirement demands of universities to spend resources on remedial education, bridging classes, and general learner support programmes. Over the years as more and more underprepared students enter the university system, this is putting a strain on the universities. There is a feeling amongst South Africans that some universities are admitting more African international students so as to meet the set racial quotas, without having to spend significant amounts of financial resources on learning support programmes. This definitely was the conviction of the university lecturer at a historically white Afrikaans university I talked to. She was feeling very resentful at what she said was the preferential treatment given to foreign African students.

At my organisation, I know of a Head of a Research Programme who said they would like to be allowed to take in more than the 25% quota of African international interns because she insisted that suitable local interns were scarce. It was obvious to me that the manager wanted interns her Programme would not have to spend time training, but could immediately use as research assistants. Such practices defeat the purpose of programmes such as this internship one, which is to increase the pool of researchers in the country.

Internationalisation versus, and over Africanisation; nationalised curricula; and indigenous knowledge

The phenomenon of international students in universities is an opportunity for cultural and indigenous knowledge exchange between people of different nationalities and continents. However, while there is a generally-understood and distinct American education, the same cannot be said of African education. It seems to me the SA universities are not using this experience to export African indigenous education or an Africanised version of knowledge. What the SA universities are offering in terms of curriculum is similar to British and American curricula. To local and African international students that is reassuring because that translates into "high standard" global education, the same education one would get if one went to a British or an American university. For me, however, this is a missed opportunity to export an Africanised, but still world standard education. For the students from the western countries, especially Britain and the US, it would have enriched these students' knowledge and lives to add a curriculum with an African flavour to what they had already learnt in their own countries.

Aside from the formal curriculum, international students do get educated informally through social interactions. The interaction may take place inside the university through group discussions, social interactions on and off campus, through organised interactions, such as visiting institutions such as local crèches, hospitals or residential communities. This may be a required component, for instance, a practical component or fieldwork, but it may just be the student's desire or interest to find out more about the environment. International education is also facilitated by the existence of local host families, whereby a student may learn the local language, which may be the learning language for those who do not speak English well. The form of compensation for boarding and lodging may be financial or it could be services or assistance offered such as domestic housekeeping or teaching the house owner's child or children the foreign language which is the student's home language.

Being an international student and being a host institution of international students is also a form of investment whose returns include international citizenship. The international students' phenomenon has resulted in lifetime friendships and networks across the globe. Some of these end up being political connections when the students end up in powerful positions on the global stage, such as country Presidents, foreign affairs ministers or United Nations officials. In the modern world global careers and global citizens are increasing and international education contributes to this.

Benefits: Existing and possible

In conclusion, what are the benefits of the existing and increasing number of African international students in the SA universities? The following have been expressed by students in my study and other studies such as the ASSAf's 2010 PhD study.

- Universities needing to meet quotas & to redress – For the cynics, universities increasing the number of international students in their universities kill 2 birds with 1 stone, because they are able to meet the black student quota admission without

spending lots towards academic support for underprepared students. Universities also benefit from the diverse international student (and even staff) population, and having to offer an international curriculum.

- Students from outside SA get access to “quality” education and a wide variety of courses and qualifications that they would not get at home, just a few hours away from home. These international students also experience personal growth and a global experience which opens their horizons.
- SA society – Since it has been reported that one third of international PhD students in SA reported an intention to stay in SA after graduating, if this materialises, this would be a positive contribution to the SA society which would be importing diverse skills and knowledge.
- Local Africans – Through interactions with international students SA gain global experience. For the local Africans, who are emerging from decades of oppression it is good for them to see possibilities and heights they could reach from watching and interacting with the “born-free” Africans, and being able to debunk myths about Africans and the limits as to how far they can go.
- Country of origin – The African countries of origin gain from the experience of international students when the graduates return to their countries with new skills and knowledge. The 2010 ASSAf PhD study recommends, for SA, embracing “brain circulation”; and escalating the numbers of SA doctoral graduates through external intervention programmes, to alleviate the problem of blockages in the graduate and postgraduate pipeline and limited supervisory capacity; and to ensure international exposure for doctoral students. These benefits are also possible for the African international students’ countries of origins.

The phenomenon of international students, therefore, should be encouraged, and best practices in making international students abroad feel at home away from home should be replicated all over the world.

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