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INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: A REVIEW OF PRESSING CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The internationalisation of the South African higher education (HE) system, has involved (among other developments) the steady increase of international student enrolment, particularly from other African nations. While there has been a considerable increase in the percentage of international students over the past few decades, little is known about the challenges they confront and the ways in which socio-political and economic issues facing South Africa and the HE system may impact them. This article focuses on significant features of the South African HE system and considers some of the theoretical challenges

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faced by international students within this context. Pressing socio-political and economic issues facing South African HE specifically, and the nation more generally, are highlighted and in turn their relevance for challenges faced by international students relating to xenophobia, discrimination and financial difficulties are addressed.

Keywords: internationalisation, challenges, international students, xenophobia, financial difficulties

INTRODUCTION

To a considerable extent, South African higher education (HE) has experienced fundamental change driven by local priorities. Worthy of noting is the increased access to university education for those who were previously excluded from attending elite top-tier universities reserved for white students under the apartheid government. However, the South African HE system also shows signs of being keenly in touch with global realities and internationalisation trends. Internationalisation in South Africa has been about forging both a global and a national identity that takes into consideration local concerns and an international scope (Dunn and Nilan 2007, 50; Hall 2010). The internationalisation of the South African HE system has involved (among other developments) the steady increase of international student enrolment, particularly from other African nations. The impetus for this steady increase can in part be attributed to the appeal of high calibre educational institutions within the country that present a less expensive option than studying in the west (Carrim and Wangenge-Ouma 2012; Dunn and Nilan 2007). South African universities have also played a role in actively increasing the number of international students. For example, many universities, including the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, the University of the Western Cape, and the University of Pretoria, to name just a few, have embarked on strategic plans to increase the number of international students. This article focuses on significant features of the South African HE system and considers some of the theoretical challenges faced by international students within this context. Pressing socio-political and economic issues facing South African HE specifically, and the nation more generally, will be highlighted and in turn, their relevance for the theoretical challenges faced by international students will be discussed. Special attention will be paid to international students hailing from the African continent, as they make up the majority of international students in South Africa.

The article focuses on the university sector. While the HE system in South Africa expands beyond the university sector, and includes vocational training and an array of adult education programmes, international students have traditionally moved across borders to gain advanced university training, and thus it would reasonably

follow that the focus be placed on the university. Another compelling reason for focusing on the university is that the university sector comprises a large part of the HE system in South Africa. The article also brings specific attention to non-academic challenges faced by international students. While academic challenges and difficulties are important and need to be investigated, it has been noted that non-academic matters and circumstances that extend beyond the formal academic realm, such as financial circumstances and social involvement, have been under-researched, yet are critical to better understanding students' concerns (Arambewela 2010; Ertl et al. 2008; Furr 2002).

We begin by providing a rationale that supports the need to address the experiences and challenges faced by international students in South Africa. Thereafter, we provide a review of selected literature on non-academic challenges faced by international students throughout the globe. Subsequently, we address the economic and socio-political issues facing South African universities specifically, and the nation more generally. Lastly, we discuss some of the documented emerging challenges faced by international students within the context of South Africa.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The number of international students has steadily increased worldwide. This can in part be attributed to the increase in HE enrolment across the globe and the increasing demand for a university education (Du Plessis and Fourie 2011). While there is a long history of people studying across borders, this trend has been on the rise since at least the mid-20th century, with the United States (US) having seen an increase of 1 200 per cent since 1954 (Chen and Kerstetter 1999). The US and the United Kingdom (UK) host the largest numbers of international students: 764 495 and 480 755, respectively (IIE 2012). South Africa only hosts a fraction of the number of international students hosted by the US and the UK; however, between 1996 and 2006, international student enrolment in the new democratic nation increased by 54.55 per cent (Du Plessis and Fourie 2011). Despite the considerable increase in the percentage of international students over the past few decades, little is known about the challenges they confront and the ways in which economic and socio-political issues facing South Africa and the HE system may impact them.

Traditionally, students from so-called developing countries such as China and India temporarily left their home countries to take up study in purportedly developed countries such as the US and those in Europe. Indeed, the asymmetrical relationship between 'knowledge producing' countries in the north and 'knowledge using' developing countries in the south has benefited knowledge producing nations (Arambewela 2010, 160) and indicates that the north, to a great extent, controls the internationalisation process (Altbach and Knight 2007). This pattern of students from the south taking up study opportunities at universities in the ostensibly

well-developed north can no longer be taken for granted. This traditional way of viewing student mobility is not the norm for many host countries. For example, the increase of 'south-to-south activities' in Asia and Africa is indicative of ever-changing international developments (Altbach and Knight 2007, 291). A handful of developing countries now host a substantial number of international students hailing from other developing countries, with India and the Philippines leading in this regard (Altbach and Knight 2007). With respect to Africa, movement extending out of the continent overwhelmingly follows the south-north pattern. However, there has been a rapid increase in HE cross-border exchanges on the African continent (Baijnath 2013). In particular there is a clear pattern of movement from other African countries to South Africa (Sehoole 2011). Statistics on international student enrolment provide support for this. In 2006, South Africa hosted over 53 000 international students, 67 per cent of whom were from other African nations, with just over 71 per cent of students hailing from Africa, Asia and South America combined (Du Plessis and Fourie 2011). Given recent changes in the South African HE system and the increase of international students from within the continent, it is befitting to engage in an analysis of the South African HE system and take into consideration some of the theoretical challenges faced by international students.

CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The non-academic challenges faced by international students have received considerably less attention than the traditional academic issues they face that focus on teaching, learning, writing and language difficulties. Nonetheless, there is a growing body of literature that addresses critical issues that extend beyond the formal academic realm (see, e.g., Aldridge and Rowley 2001, for a discussion of key academic and non-academic factors that contribute to students' withdrawal from HE). These issues include, but are not limited to, prejudice and discrimination, and financial difficulties. For the purposes of this article, prejudice and discrimination, and financial difficulties are specifically addressed since these issues speak to matters of relevance for international students within the HE system, but are also matters that are ubiquitous within the broader South African society.

Prejudice and discrimination

Traditionally, the assumption has been that international students must adjust to their host country and gain skills that allow them to temporarily and successfully live and study in what is likely an unfamiliar context for them (see, e.g., Church 1982; Coles and Swami 2012). In highlighting student adjustment and adaptation, the implication is that the onus is on international students to fit in and little responsibility, if any, is directed at host institutions and host societies (see, e.g., Bevis 2002). Critics of this

perspective contend that not all of the challenges that international students face with respect to fitting into the society can be conceived of as matters of adjustment. For example, it has been argued that some of the gravest challenges can be attributed to the host society's inadequacies (Lee and Rice 2007). Perceived cultural discrimination, verbal insults and physical assaults experienced by international students both inside and outside the university are prime examples that some of the problems faced by international students have less to do with their own adjustment, and have more to do with the host institution and the host society's shortcomings (Lee and Rice 2007).

It has been noted that international students experience higher levels of discrimination than domestic students (Poyrazli and Lopez 2007). It is also well documented that international students from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America experience prejudice and cultural discrimination in Western host countries. For example, international students in the UK and Germany who appear to be foreigners report more discrimination than their domestic peers (Krahé et al. 2005). International students of colour in the US report more perceived discrimination and more culturally-based verbal and physical assaults than their white counterparts (Lee and Rice 2007; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007). Further, there is a growing base of literature on the discriminatory and racist experiences faced by international female students from Africa and Asia studying in Western nations (see, e.g., Beoku-Betts 2004; Bonazzo and Wong 2007). However, perceived discrimination and violence directed at international students is not confined to Western Europe and the US, it has also been documented in the Ukraine (MacWilliams 2004), New Zealand (Butcher and McGrath 2004), Australia (Marginson et al. 2010), and Japan (Brender 2004). Additionally, perceived discrimination and prejudice, and the way this relates to international students' utilisation of help resources, aspects of their identity, and depression levels, has also been researched and the findings indicate that perceived discrimination and prejudice significantly impact international students' overall wellbeing (Frey and Roysircar 2006; Jung, Hecht and Wadsworth 2007).

Literature focusing on perceived prejudice and discrimination, and violence directed at international students, points to a significant, but under-researched area that is pertinent to both students' formal university experiences and experiences based in the larger social context of the host country. International students report prejudicial comments and a lack of empathy from professors and fellow students, as well as from community members who they encounter in public spaces and the broader host community (Lee and Rice 2007; Robertson et al. 2000). While international students' reports in this regard present critical areas of international student experiences that are in need of improvement, addressing them is difficult, as this requires host institutions and host societies to make considerable changes. At a minimum, the discriminatory behaviour and culturally based acts of violence need to cease, but ideally, an ethos that welcomes and celebrates diversity needs to be fostered within host societies.

Financial difficulties

There is no doubt that international students make a sizeable financial impact on their institution and local host community, as well as their host country more generally. For example, in 2011 alone, international students contributed 22.7 billion US dollars to the US economy, with the bulk of students relying on family and personal funds to pay for their studies (IIE 2012). This financial impact is most evident via their tuition, housing and daily living expenses; however, they also contribute to the tourism industry within their host country. For example, Chen and Kerstetter (1999) note that international students are a profitable segment of the pleasure travel market. Similarly, but on a smaller scale, South Africa has experienced relatively strong growth in HE exports (Du Plessis and Fourie 2011). Revenue generated by international students in South Africa in 2003 has been estimated at approximately 1.4 billion rands (approximately 157 million US dollars) (Donaldson and Gatsinzi 2005). Research at select universities in the Western Cape has endeavoured to calculate how much money international students inject into the local economy, with travel and tourism being factored into the equation (see, e.g., Donaldson and Gatsinzi 2005; Du Plessis and Fourie 2011).

While the international student market is indeed a lucrative one, Lee and Rice (2007) warn of the danger of viewing students as a revenue source and argue that this potentially lessens the significance of the academic, cross-cultural, and social experience. It also contributes to the construction of an erroneous image that depicts all international students (or at least their families) as being well-equipped to finance their international studies. International students tend to enjoy high socio-economic status in their home country and are generally viewed as financially secure (Leder and Forgasz 2004; Lee and Rice 2007). However, a sizeable minority face serious financial concerns (Arthur 1997; Bontrager, Birch and Kracht 1990; Harman 2003; Lindley, McCall and Abu-Arab 2013; Marginson et al. 2010). The financial problems reported by international students range from struggling to make ends meet; receiving remittance requests from family members back home; and refraining from asking family for financial assistance (so as to not burden them), even when they find themselves in financial straits (Marginson et al. 2010). Some faculty members report awareness of the financial difficulties experienced by international students (Trice 2003). International students with limited financial support find it necessary to take up part-time work (Harman 2003). However, their situation in this regard can be further complicated by student visa stipulations, which not uncommonly restrict the number of hours students may engage in paid employment (Lee and Rice 2007).

The high cost of housing is also a major concern, with housing and financial difficulties being interconnected (Bartram 2013). This is to be expected, since housing is quite likely one of the biggest expenses for international students, and concerns of this nature are exacerbated if students are not being housed by the university (which is increasingly the case, given the high demand and short supply

of university housing) and are studying in expensive cities where affordable housing is scarce. The increasing cost of housing can result in unaffordable suitable accommodation. International students who struggle financially may be left with no choice but to live in unacceptable conditions which have been described as living in 'squalor' (Marginson et al. 2010, 150). Cash-strapped international students may unfortunately find themselves living in overcrowded and unsafe living conditions (see, e.g., Marginson et al. 2010).

PRESSING CONCERNS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

We now turn to addressing some of the pressing economic and socio-political issues facing South Africa and more specifically, South African HE. We begin by providing a broad overview of the economic landscape in South Africa and an overview of the specific financial implications facing HE. This is followed by a discussion of discrimination and xenophobic sentiments within the broader society, and in HE specifically. Additionally, a discussion of several inefficiencies and shortcomings apparent in the HE sector are presented.

Economic issues

South Africa's position as an economic powerhouse within the African continent is undeniable. It is home to one of the largest economies in Africa. Nonetheless, the country is plagued by major economic challenges that have not been alleviated by the advent of democracy. South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, and is characterised by severe discrepancies between the rich and poor (Bhorat, Van der Westhuizen and Jacobs 2009; Gelb 2003; Lam 1999; May 1988; Nattrass and Seekings 2001; Sanders and Chopra 2006). Of particular concern is that since the end of apartheid (a system that undoubtedly contributed to severe inequalities), the conditions of the poorest segment of the population have failed to improve (Robins 2005). The poor majority continue to face dire circumstances. Unemployment is unacceptably high in black marginalised communities, low skilled workers not uncommonly earn meagre wages, and the cost of living continues to rise at an unprecedented rate. It is disconcerting that while the country harbours a great amount of wealth, the majority of people struggle to make a living.

With respect to the specific financial circumstances surrounding the HE system, for at least the past decade the system has experienced financial struggles characterised by a decrease in public funding and an increase in student debt (Dunn and Nilan 2007). In 2000, state funding comprised nearly half (49%) of all HE funding, but decreased to 40 per cent in 2008 (Bunting et al. 2010). Additionally, the state's HE funding (as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product) has decreased over the past

two decades, thus compelling higher education institutions (HEIs) to raise their fees and seek other sources of income (De Villiers and Steyn 2009). This is corroborated by the rate at which student fees have increased − a rate higher than that of inflation (Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008). Whereas in 2000, 24 per cent of HE funding came from student fees, in 2008 this figure increased to 28 per cent (Bunting et al. 2010). It has been noted that addressing funding challenges by increasing tuition fees is known to have negative consequences for HE access (Carrim and Wangenge-Ouma 2012). Further, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has lagged behind the rate of inflation (Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008). This means that needy students are required to pay increasingly higher fees, without increasing state support. Although the NSFAS grants priority to assisting the economically neediest students, the assistance it provides is insufficient to cover the actual cost of study (Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008). In other words, students (particularly low-income students) seem to be withstanding the dire consequences of an under-funded system.

Xenophobia and discrimination

South Africa faces pressing economic problems that have had an impact on the HE system and its students. However, pressing social concerns relating to discrimination and xenophobia are also apparent. Xenophobic sentiments in South Africa are widespread and continue to be cause for much concern (Bloch 2010; Dodson 2010). Anti-immigrant sentiments became pronounced in the early 1990s when South Africa transitioned into a democracy and experienced an increase in immigration from other African countries (Crush 2000; Morris 1998). Since then, the number of undocumented immigrants has been hyperbolised (Crush 2000; Morris 1998) and violence against immigrants from other African nations takes place with disturbing regularity (see the following for selected accounts of the xenophobic violence that has taken place across South Africa: Amisi et al. 2011; Morris 1998; Peberdy and Crush 1998).

The unfavourable views that South Africans have of immigrants have been captured by both national surveys and the media. One such survey indicated that the majority of respondents are of the view that immigrants take away local jobs, engage in crime, and bring diseases to the country (Mattes et al. 2000). Unfortunately, anti-immigrant sentiments are widespread and it has been noted that 'intolerance (against immigrants) is extremely pervasive and growing in intensity and seriousness' (Crush 2000, 103). The role of the media with respect to pervasive xenophobic sentiments has also received attention, with the media not only capturing, but also shaping, anti-immigrant sentiments (Morris 1998). Danso and McDonald's (2001) assessment of the media's coverage of international migration revealed that the majority of the media assumes an uncritical anti-foreigner stance on issues surrounding immigrants

and immigration. It is also noteworthy that more prejudice appears to be directed at black African immigrants than at white immigrants (HRW 1998; Morris 1998). In particular, black immigrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo appear to be targeted (Morris 1998; Reitzes and Bam 2000).

South African HEIs are not insulated from the wider South African society, and discrimination and xenophobic sentiments have been manifested at some of the country's most prestigious universities (DoE 2008). The 2008 Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions revealed that while racism continues to be a problem in HE, xenophobia, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination are equally pervasive (DoE 2008). More specifically, tensions between South African students and students from other African countries have been apparent at historically black universities. The 2008 report suggests that cautionary measures should be taken against latent xenophobic disturbances. It notes that 'although it seems to be contained, the potential of xenophobia rearing its ugly head should not be underestimated' (DoE 2008, 47). Unfortunately, universities in South Africa continue to remain powerful mechanisms of social exclusion and injustice that succumb to external conditions linked to the wider society (Badat 2010, 10).

HE system inefficiencies

While it needs to be acknowledged that HE plays a vital role in economic and social development, the South African HE system is riddled with system inefficiencies. For instance, demand for access to HEIs surpasses their capacity to provide quality education and support for both local and international students (see, e.g., Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007; Soudien 2008). Additionally, postgraduate enrolment and graduate outputs at all levels are inadequately low and need to improve in order to support South Africa's economic and social development needs (DHET 2012; Van Zyl 2010).

South Africa's HE inefficiencies can largely be attributed to the lack of adequate funding, and the ripple effect that this has on the provision of adequate resources (Kraak 2013; Letseka et al. 2010). Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013, 292) point to the significance of this by arguing that funding of HE in South Africa is vital for achieving the five policy goals identified by the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE), which are as follows: (1) produce graduates needed for social and economic development; (2) achieve equity; (3) achieve diversity; (4) sustain and promote research; and (5) restructure the institutional landscape of the higher education system (DoE 2001).

The transformation of HE post-1994, pushed for enrolling, at an unprecedented rate, students who previously did not have opportunities to attend HEIs. Many of these students were recipients of an inadequate schooling system and struggled to obtain the requisite financial resources and academic skills to succeed at university (Jansen 2004, 2011; Koen, Cele and Libhaber 2006). From 1999 to 2003, there was a 25 per cent increase in student enrolment, from 540 000 to 718 000. This increase in student enrolment was informed by two main factors. Firstly, the NPHE sounded the call for South Africa to have a larger pool of highly skilled labour to promote development. Secondly, an increase in student numbers can be seen as a reflection of the financial incentive provided by the Ministry of Education to increase enrolment (DoE 2008; Koen et al. 2006). However, South Africa's HE attrition rates continue to reflect the system's inefficiencies. Despite the high enrolment of students, an unacceptably high number of black South African students do not re-register in the following year (Cloete 2009). Koen et al. (2006, 406) note that this 'revolving door' phenomenon is attributed to a variety of interrelated factors. While HEIs exclude students on financial or academic grounds, students also withdraw voluntarily. Furthermore, Koen et al. (2006) argue that admitting students and having a large proportion of them drop out, reaffirms and perpetuates the educational sorting and class reproduction patterns attributed to HEIs in general (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

The attrition rates are indeed unsettling: of the 120 000 HE students enrolled in South Africa in 2000, 30 per cent dropped out in their first year, 20 per cent dropped out in their second year and of the remaining 50 per cent, only 22 per cent graduated within the stipulated time to earn a three year generic bachelor's degree (Letseka et al. 2010, 88). At this rate, it is quite feasible that pass rates are less than 50 per cent, amounting to an inordinate amount of wasted resources, funding, and a potential skilled workforce, not to mention the loss of opportunities for the thousands of students who drop out.

CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN HE SYSTEM

Having considered some pressing concerns in South Africa and its HE system, and having provided a context for the broader environment that international students face in South Africa, it is pertinent to consider some of the emerging challenges faced by international students. The discussion below has been generated by drawing on the pressing concerns that characterise the HE system and by taking into consideration the socio-political and economic issues facing South Africa. Although the challenges put forth are conceptual in nature, they nonetheless serve to highlight some potentially significant problems faced by international students in South Africa.

Xenophobia and discrimination

Given the pervasive xenophobic sentiments apparent across South Africa, 'the experiences, then, of non-South African Africans in South African universities, both at the levels of staff and students, cannot be assumed to be positive' (Carrim and Wangenge-Ouma 2012, 13). Xenophobic sentiments compounded by the fear of crime, can make for an unwelcoming milieu for international students (cf. Herman 2011a). This can in turn restrict the activities of international students. In his study of students from Zimbabwe, Chimucheka (2012, 228) reports (in the context of the discrimination experienced by them), that 'there are still activities that cannot be done by international students alone'. This suggests that some international students self-regulate their movements for reasons relating to perceived discrimination. In particular, evidence exists that international students refrain from travelling for leisure purposes. When African international students have been asked to provide reasons for not travelling within South Africa for tourism purposes, among other reasons provided, they mentioned perceived hostility toward foreigners (Donaldson and Gatsinzi 2005). This suggests that international students hailing from other African countries engage in self-restricting their movements in attempts to thwart either real or perceived discrimination.

International students hailing from other African countries have indeed voiced their concerns with respect to issues relating to discrimination and xenophobia. Examples are provided below:

> ... I can authoritatively say that South African society and government do not treat foreign students from poor African countries very well (Herman 2011b, 50).

> ... some problems that happen, like xenophobia, are affecting non-South African nationals, making people in a position of permanent fear. This can lead to days of not much commitment to work: need more safety (Herman 2011b, 50).

These reports indicate that fear; discrimination and xenophobia are not only a matter of personal physical safety, but that they may also have an adverse impact on international students' academic work and mental wellbeing.

We do not argue that all international students hailing from other parts of Africa are under xenophobic threat, or that all South African nationals are xenophobic. Indeed, it is noteworthy that for many students from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, residing in South Africa is similar to 'being at home, except for occasional reported incidents of xenophobia' (Sehoole 2011, 61). The benefits that students from SADC countries enjoy in South Africa have been documented and thus international students' experiences are not all negative (Chimucheka 2012). We, however, do wish to bring to light that problems relating to xenophobia and discrimination may be relevant for the most vulnerable international students.

Financial difficulties

International students in South Africa do not necessarily share similar financial concerns. International students are not a homogenous group and they come from different parts of the world with different monetary resources. While international students from the Americas, Asia and Europe tend to be well funded and economically secure, international students from Africa may experience more financial concerns. Economic disparities among these different groups of students are apparent when we look at their spending and travel patterns. For instance, students hailing from other African countries spend (on a monthly basis) only a fraction of what their European, North American and Asian counterparts spend (Du Plessis and Fourie 2011).

Additionally, research on international students studying at the University of the Western Cape revealed that many African international students do not travel within South Africa for recreational purposes (Donaldson and Gatsinzi 2005). While nearly half of the international students surveyed reported taking weekend trips, the number of African international students who indicated this, were in the minority. Financial obstacles were reported as the main reason for not engaging in travel. While international students from Europe, North America and Asia reported that South Africa is affordable, 27 per cent of African international students reported contrary information (Donaldson and Gatsinzi 2005). These figures suggest that as a group, international students from Africa have less monetary resources at their disposal compared to their counterparts who hail from other parts of the world. It would thus follow that having less financial resources makes students more susceptible to experiencing financial challenges. It is concerning that the segment of international students who are quite likely to be at most risk of experiencing financial challenges, also make up the biggest proportion of international students in the country.

Student fees are also relevant when assessing the financial situation of international students since they are generally required to pay higher fees than domestic students, however, certain exceptions exist. For instance, students from SADC countries pay fees that are equivalent to those of domestic students. However, given the financial problems faced by the South African HE system, which have been discussed earlier in the article, and which Dunn and Nilan (2007, 271) observe to be related to 'financial struggle, low achievement and institutional disorganisation', the aforementioned authors contend that recruiting large numbers of international students exacerbates local problems. They argue in favour of a more balanced approach to internationalisation. It is nonetheless important to point out that the need persists to train and prepare students within the region who would perhaps otherwise not be able to develop their academic potential due to a lack of sufficient universities in their home countries. For instance, Zimbabwe's political instability has 'led to a near collapse of higher education in that country' and countries such as Lesotho, Botswana and Namibia each only boast one public university (Sehoole 2011, 61). We must also take into consideration that the struggling economies of SADC countries

such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi would make it exceedingly difficult for students from those countries to pay higher fees than those for South African nationals.

Research on international student satisfaction across 27 institutions, in which students from Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana were overrepresented, indicates that international students are dissatisfied with: a lack of opportunities to earn money; the financial support they receive (or lack thereof); and the cost of accommodation (Rhodes University 2006). Thus, given the economic circumstances of some of the SADC countries and international students' reports of dissatisfaction with financial aspects of their studies, it would be prudent to advocate for new and innovative forms of financial support for this group of students. It is noteworthy that students from other African countries contribute to increasing the number of students engaging in advanced (master's and doctoral) studies in South Africa, but may experience significant financial challenges with respect to pursuing their advanced degrees. Despite efforts to increase the number of PhD students in South Africa, this number has remained low. In fact, PhD enrolments would be even lower, were it not for a sizeable minority of PhD students from other parts of Africa (Mouton, Louw and Strydom 2013). Figures from 2009 indicate that 22 per cent of students enrolled in doctoral programmes were international students from other African countries (Sehoole 2011). While African international students contribute to the goals of increasing the number of postgraduate students in South Africa, they appear to be bearing financial difficulties when compared to their non-African counterparts.

SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUES AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO DIFFICULTIES FACED BY AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The challenges faced by international students hailing from Africa that specifically relate to xenophobia must be viewed in the context of a South African socio-economic system that is failing the majority of its population. These challenges must also be viewed in the context of widespread xenophobic sentiments. Both economic self-interest and marginalisation based on cultural otherness are relevant when examining anti-foreigner sentiments (Fetzer 2010). As such, xenophobia and discrimination within HE and its impact on international students, particularly those hailing from other parts of Africa, can be seen as embedded in broader economic and social issues. While traditionally universities have been regarded as places that challenge the status quo and raise issues relating to social justice and egalitarian principles, they are not insulated from the broader society. The responsibility to advocate change in this regard, and transform the HE system into one that is free of discrimination against African international students, therefore, lies not only with the HE system itself, but also with the broader society.

The challenges faced by African international students that specifically relate to financial difficulties must be situated in the context of an HE system that is increasingly underfunded and that struggles to acquire sufficient resources to support its neediest students; domestic and international alike. However, we must also consider the major economic challenges that plague the new democratic nation, particularly the challenges relating to economic inequalities and a lack of employment opportunities. A lack of sufficient employment opportunities may mean that there are few or no jobs available for international students, which could help them gain needed funds. The struggling economies of other African countries must also be taken into consideration as international students hailing from other countries may struggle to acquire sufficient resources in their home countries to fund their studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We have discussed some of the selected challenges faced by international students by heeding attention to xenophobia, discrimination and financial concerns. However, further research is necessary to investigate the different forms of xenophobia, discrimination and financial difficulties faced by international students across different HEIs in South Africa. Further research that describes, analyses and helps us to better understand these challenges is necessary, as is research that would allow us to quantify such problems. Moreover, the type of institutional support available to ameliorate these challenges has received little attention and should be further investigated. Further research that is responsive to the academic as well as non-academic challenges and difficulties experienced by international students in South Africa will contribute to the production of knowledge in this area, and also has the potential to advocate for fruitful and productive international student experiences.

CONCLUSION

The article has addressed pressing socio-political and economic issues facing South Africa in general and the HE system in particular in order to provide a context for addressing the theoretical challenges faced by international students. While it is acknowledged that xenophobia, discrimination and financial concerns make up a selective list of problems and that other non-academic challenges deserve attention as well, these aforementioned challenges present serious concerns that extend beyond the HE system. Socio-political and economic issues not only provide a context for understanding these challenges, but also serve to provide a better understanding of them in relation to broader social structures.

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