

International students' experiences in the South African academic environment

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International students constitute a minority yet important group in the South African universities. Not only does the university benefit but the community as well. The diverse cultural backgrounds, together with the local culture, truly re-emphasise South Africa as a rainbow nation. For the student, proximity from home, affordability and quality of education make South African universities the ultimate study destination.

However, international students have been in the shadow when it comes to integrating into the institutions. From the harsh treatment at the South African embassies to the borderline segregated treatment in the institution, South African universities are yet to realise that this impact goes beyond economic gain but also the leadership and political relationship with the other African countries. This article serves to discuss the impact of international students, mainly from the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries, on the South African universities. This includes the struggles that they face as well as the benefits of having foreign students to aid in internationalising these institutions.

There is no greater feeling that can trump that moment when your study visa finally is approved. After all the paperwork and queues, it is finally happening. What the others see as a rich foreigner coming to indulge in all the pleasures known to the post-teenage mind, is in all reality what defines the bare meaning of struggle and sacrifices that have been made and is only a taste what is to come. All this does not stop one from having pursued these hopes and dreams.

International migration is an emerging practice of our times. In my view, the most significant pull factors to study in South Africa are affordable fees, proximity to home, the cost of living and government subsidies for the students from the region (Jenny and Sehoone 2015). However, accommodation difficulties, lack of opportunities, lack of support and xenophobic tendencies were found to be among the key detrimental factors for the SADC students.

The South African embassy experience is a nightmare for prospective students. Many have been victims of mild xenophobic attitudes and utterances, ranging from derogatory remarks all the way to unadulterated insults while following, ever patiently so, the winding queues under the baking heat of the sub-Saharan sun in an effort to process their visas. The new immigration laws which were introduced to ease the pain do the very opposite, they introduced a new domain of complexity to what was already a tumultuous affair. Previously, you could travel while awaiting a decision from the consular, holding on to the receipt as proof that you had indeed applied for your study permit. Wielding receipt as proof of an application has been abolished. Expired visas are no longer attracting a fine but are deemed undesirable. Crossing the borders without a valid visa makes you 'undesirable' in terms of S27 (3) for a period between twelve months and up to five years (Government Gazette 2002). Therefore, one cannot simply return to South Africa and study while the visas are being processed. Those who wanted to begin their studies, consequently, had to suspend their studies.

The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) has outsourced the services of the Visa Facilitation Services (VFS) (Government Gazette 2002). There is confusion as to the correct requirements because the information provided by the DHA and the VFS are different. It is costlier to apply for a study permit for students from the SADC region.

The forward-thinking student resolves to make ends meet by working shifts at the local restaurant to alleviate the financial burden, whereas the study visa permits students to work for only 20 hours per week; a pity indeed. -abiding companies become reluctant to hire international students due to these restrictions. Moreover, sad enough, permits can only be renewed in the respective student's home country. The effect of this is that international students requiring work experience may be unable to complete their studies in the minimum prescribed time if they need work experience to complete the course (Le Roux Attorney 2019).

It is understandable that there is a need to keep abreast with standards that effectively and efficiently assist in managing migration. However, this seems to be detrimental to the internationalisation and transformation of the South African tertiary education system. The laws have become a push factor. It is essential to have international students who can incorporate their knowledge into the education system while also strengthening their global position.

The South African tertiary education system has been in the process of transformation for a significant amount of time. There are various funding opportunities available for students that are not limited to vacation work. Regardless, for the international student, the struggle continues as there is never enough information available. In reality, there is always a strong preference to hire local students, which, in turn, leads to their colleagues from across the borders, becoming less than reluctant to apply for the opportunities available.

In terms of tuition fees, international students are required to pay the full tuition fee before registration. In special circumstances and after negotiation, arrangements can be made for those who cannot afford to pay the amount within a prescribed time. Should push comes to shove and they still cannot pay within that time, then they are subjected to an interest fee, more fuel for the fire.

The universities need to review their policies to include international students. These students are the leaders of tomorrow, regardless here nor there. They are going to shape Africa's tomorrow; their experiences predicate their future relations with South Africa and the continent as a whole. The tertiary education sector should work together with the Department of Home Affairs to establish a better system that resolves the challenges faced by the tertiary education sector and prepares the country and the continent as a whole for world-class leadership and talent.

References

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