

The Unnoticed Few: Exploring the Challenges Confronting International Students and Staff at a Rural University in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation and international student and staff mobility are not new phenomena, and South African universities have been fairly successful in the recruitment of internationals – particularly from other African countries, yet the challenges associated with internationalising universities remain persistent. This study sought to examine the challenges faced by international students and staff at a rural university in South Africa. We relied on a qualitative research approach which enabled us to rely on semi-structured interviews with international students, staff, and managers from the university's International Office. The findings revealed that while some of the opportunities for studying and working abroad are to widen one's horizons and experience new cultures, international students and staff often experience difficulties such as language barriers, culture shocks, mental health issues, and financial pressures when adapting to their new context. We recommended that there be behavioural interventions, cultural interventions, and also financial support for student and staff expatriates.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; integration; internationalisation; international education; rural university

INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of higher education is by no means a new discipline. The seminal work by Altbach and Knight (2007), reveals that the internationalisation of higher education is a result of globalisation which has seen goods, capital, and people flocking to economies that are more developed than those of their home countries. Arguments have been made to the extent that higher education is increasingly becoming commodified as universities are said to be becoming more identical to corporates as opposed to their erstwhile collegial outlook (Fan & Stark, 2007; Ilieva et al., 2014; Knight, 2011; Yemini & Sagie, 2016). This can be explained by three aspects namely, idealism (the assumption that internationalism is inherently virtuous), instrumentalism (that education is a means to other ends such as revenue and enriching labour) and educationalism (that internationalisation is meant for deeper learning and human development) (Stier, 2004). As such, the internationalisation of higher education is often seen as a response to globalisation and has oftentimes been lauded for respecting the sanctity of individual cultures (Gacel-Ávila, 2005).

Globally, universities are rapidly chasing the goal of 'becoming internationalised' (Bamberger et al., 2019; Wihlborg & Robson, 2018), yet the quest to internationalise universities has remained contentious. On the one hand, some clamour for globalised universities that are awake to the prescribed notion of universities that are 'global', while on the other, there are those that challenge this notion, opting instead for decoloniality in its varied forms (de Wit, 2020; Harrison, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). According to de Wit et al. (2015) and Uzhegova and Baik (2022), internationalisation happens as a result of academic, political, economic, and sociocultural rationales. Studies have demonstrated that the internationalisation agenda has been driven by universities' agendas to soar in terms of reputation, rankings, and excellence (Albusaidi, 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Ergin, de Wit, & Leask, 2019). With the current outlook of the global market of higher education, there has been increased migration of students that has resulted in an explosion in the population of international students (França & Cairns, 2020; Nada & Araújo, 2019). However, it has been contended that this migration has not been immune to challenges, some of which are general to the experiences of migrants (Caruana, 2014; Ching et al., 2017; Helen, 2016; Masud, 2020).

According to Nada and Araújo (2019), some of the prominent challenges faced by international students and staff include language difficulties, cultural shocks, and xenophobia increasingly experienced by tendencies of blaming migrants for some of the problems extant in receiving populations. This is contrary to the ideals of multiculturalism and inclusivity that are often preached by universities attracting international students (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Bertram et al., 2014; Ching et al., 2017; Titrek et al., 2016). In discussing cultural shock, Griffith et al. (2005) and Lichan (2015) define cultural shock as the extreme disorientation that affects people getting into new cultures. It is therefore not surprising that international students and staff from countries that share culture, language, and racial traits often experience less shock than those from unrelated contexts (Majee & Ressa, 2020; Robson & Wihlborg, 2019; Tight,

2022). Seemingly small cultural aspects such as social interactions are vastly different when an individual enters a new culture, hence, Ching et al. (2017) contend that cultural adaptation is a never-ending pursuit.

The transition to new educational contexts has also been known to be disrupted by the teaching styles and strategies that are utilised in different learning environments. Lichan (2015:9) argues that learning challenges need to be emphasised when studying the challenges associated with transitioning to universities outside one's country of origin because oftentimes international students and staff find themselves exposed to "unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues and subjected to ambiguous and conflicting expectations". Studies conducted in this realm also reveal that adapting to different accents may also be a huge challenge for international students and staff, especially in cases where they do not share similar languages with the host communities (Griffith et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2021; Mok & Marginson, 2021; Stein, 2021). In fact, Ching et al. (2017: 477) conclude, "Learning in a foreign environment involves the learners' prior knowledge about cultural taboos, social expectations, learning approaches, and the subject matter. What is common sense for learners from the mainstream... culture may be novel to...international students". This study, therefore, sought to explore Against this background, this study sought to answer the question, "What are the challenges confronting international students and staff at rural universities in South Africa?"

METHODOLOGY

This study was underpinned by a qualitative approach because this approach allowed the researcher to interrogate the experiences of international students and staff (Leavy, 2017). The study took a single case study design because this design allowed for an in-depth understanding of these experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). The researchers conveniently sampled nineteen (19) international students, five (5) international teaching staff, and three (3) managers from the university's International Office. Below is a table showing the profiles of the student participants.

Table 1. Profiles of student participants

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Level of study |
|------------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Student 1 | Non-binary | 22 | Bachelor |
| Student 2 | Male | 30 | PhD |
| Student 3 | Non-binary | 23 | Honours |
| Student 4 | Female | 20 | Bachelor |
| Student 5 | Female | 27 | Master's |
| Student 6 | Female | 26 | PhD |
| Student 7 | Male | 21 | Bachelor |
| Student 8 | Female | 33 | PhD |
| Student 9 | Female | 23 | Honours |
| Student 10 | Male | 36 | Master's |
| Student 11 | Male | 27 | Honours |
| Student 12 | Female | 24 | PhD |
| Student 13 | Male | 30 | Honours |
| Student 14 | Female | 30 | Master's |
| Student 15 | Female | 28 | PhD |
| Student 16 | Male | 47 | Master's |
| Student 17 | Male | 20 | Bachelor |
| Student 18 | Female | 31 | Master's |
| Student 19 | Female | 26 | PhD |

Data were collected using qualitative interviews with the participants, each of which lasted for about fifteen (15) minutes. Interviews were found to be very useful because they enabled the researchers to probe further and understand the problem through the experiences of the participants, as argued by Leavy (2017). It is worth noting that the interviews were conducted in English and recorded using a voice recorder with the consent of the participants. Afterwards, the recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber who captured everything that was said by the participants. Once the data were collected, the data were analysed using thematic analysis because the thematic analysis was useful in the examination of different participant perspectives and it also helped the researchers to summarize the key features of the collected data (Nowell et al., 2017; Saldana, 2014). To ensure data trustworthiness, the researchers triangulated the units of analysis, namely the students, staff, and managers from the international office as prescribed by Leavy (2017). During data collection, the researchers upheld ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy. These considerations were communicated and agreed upon by the researchers and the participants prior to conducting the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the study's main question, participants were asked, "What challenges do foreign nationals face at this university that impede their full involvement in teaching and learning, and general social life at the university?" The findings revealed four main sub-themes that emerged in the inquiry of challenges faced by international students at a rural university in South Africa, namely language barriers, culture shocks, mental health issues, and financial pressures. The following subsections constitute the discussion of these factors.

Language hurdles

The participants revealed that language barriers constitute a significant challenge in navigating student life while away from their home countries. Participants retold how language barriers were affecting international students and staff participation in academic activities and social life. A case can be drawn from a student who noted,

I often struggle with participation in groups because of language. Most of the students in my class are Xhosa-speaking and those who cannot speak the language are just a minority. When we do group work and communicate through WhatsApp groups, but most of the communication flies over my head because I barely understand the language. I have tried to request the use of English, but some of the groupmates have their fair share of struggles with English. It is very hard to be active. (Student 17)

A manager from the International Office at the university corroborated these sentiments by noting,

...when we usually have meetings where we discuss problems faced by international students and staff, one of the most prominent ones is usually language. Presently, we do not have a programme where new students and staff are acclimatised to the language spoken by the majority of this community. Language governs the majority of interactions, so to minimise the exclusion of internationals, helping them with language training can alleviate this challenge. (Manager 2)

One can also draw from another student who argued that the use of local languages was complicating non-speakers' ability to learn effectively in classes. The student reckoned, When I joined this university, it was because it was said to be using English as the medium of instruction but when I got here, I realised that what is on paper is different from reality. Some lecturers tend to use Xhosa when making examples, and those of us that struggle with the language usually get lost. When you keep asking for clarification, it sometimes feels like you are being a problem. I am not blaming anyone, but it is that thing of being more expressive in one's mother tongue that often results in the use of local languages. It is just that I never thought of it before making this move. (Student 9)

A staff member also added,

As a staff in this university, some of the challenges that deter me from fully participating in social activities as well as engaging thoroughly with students is the language barrier. Because most of these students feel very open and lively when you communicate with them in the local

language. So, coming from a country where I am not really familiar with the click sounds, communication with students is usually just at the surface level (Staff 4)

In terms of social wellness, participants also revealed that language was making it difficult for them to adjust to their new contexts. An example can be drawn from a student who posited,

My friends from the same country as I often talk a lot about how language difficulty complicates our life here. I am very much willing to learn but the Xhosa language has several clicks which are difficult to differentiate and speak. All the languages in my country do not even have a link to Xhosa, so I have a lot to learn unlike students from Zimbabwe where some of their languages are related to Xhosa and other South African languages. Adapting has been a real challenge for me. (Student 14)

Research findings revealed language barriers appeared to have created a significant challenge in both interacting and building friendships across nationalities. In fact, the problem of language adaptation lowered the participants' desire to socialize with the locals, hindering their integration into the community. These conclusions corroborate Kuo (2011) and Freeman et al. (2019), who posited that language barriers are the main factors that exclude international cohorts from student group discussion, validate the feeling of inequalities, and serve as knowledge transition barriers. Kuo (2011) adds that being unable to engage in activities such as negotiating, shopping, arguing, and communicating – which can be done easier when one is in the comfort of their home country – can lower self-esteem and increase dislike based on foreignness. Consequently, Gong et al. (2021) posit that to overcome the challenges of cultural adaptation, foreign nationals involved in academia must endeavour to become competent communicators by actively trying to understand and speak the languages spoken by their hosts. This competence is defined as having the overall internal ability to decode and encode information in accordance with the communication customs of the host culture, which is capable of assisting international cohorts to utilize the target language and immerse themselves in the target culture (Gong et al., 2021; Larrinaga & Amurrio, 2015; Moore, 2016).

Culture shocks

In addition to language barriers, participants also reported on culture shocks as being significant challenges that international students and staff have faced. Examples of cultural shocks included religious beliefs, food traditions, dress and sexuality, and general cultures of violence extant in South Africa. One can consider the perspective of a staff who reasoned,

The practice of traditional religion in South African communities, including here at university really shocked me. Where I come from, traditional medicines and religion are not that common, so being in a place where this is celebrated was scary for me initially...it must be the same for several others who hold conservative beliefs like me. Where I come from, traditional African practices are usually seen as being dangerous – black magic, and stuff like that you see. It took me time to wrap my head around it and become more accepting. I also struggled to get a religious home because none of the churches here does things like what I was raised to believe.

Religion is really part of my personhood and struggling to find this here was a huge problem. (Staff 3)

In relation to perspectives on food traditions, one can consider the view offered by another student who lamented,
...the food here is quite different from what we have in my country and adjusting was quite a big thing...sometimes you get the odd student who taunts you for some foods that are not eaten here. It is not everyone, but when that happens it hurts a lot – it is essentially being humiliated for who you are. Some say the food we eat smells bad, and I just fail to understand how a normal human being can say this to others. (Student 10)

A manager also corroborated these experiences by adding,
...here at the university, although culture promotes respect, most of our foreign nationals act in different ways. For instance, people from West Africa prostate and kneel as a form of greeting or respect for elders. Some of our locals may not be respectful of such cultures and traditions, hence we sometimes field complaints from international students who feel isolated and frowned upon because of the differences in cultures. We have to work towards becoming more inclusive and welcoming despite the inherent differences we may have. (Manager 3)

A limited number of participants also spoke about the challenge of adapting to the cultures of violence extant in South African communities. One can consider the sentiments of another staff member who claimed,

The levels to which violence is commonplace have been shocking to me and adjusting to the reality of violence as a common occurrence has been difficult for me. This is a problem across the whole of South Africa and I am constantly feeling unsafe. For some people who have grown up here, they know how to cope – but for me, I have been robbed at knifepoint a couple of times and have been left traumatised. Some traditions oppress women, where I come from we are a matrilineal society, here it is the opposite. Making that adjustment has been a huge challenge for me. (Staff 2)

Some participants alleged that they were being singled out based on their sense of dressing. This was most evident by a student who argued,

The general way of dressing at this university is very different from what I am used to. I have been singled out by some very unkind students who have said mean things to me and have name-called me. It is like the way I dress causes me to be an easy target for bullies. Sometimes it is subtle, but in other instances, it is obvious. The respect for diverse sexualities has also been a problem for me – here minority sexualities are celebrated but where I come from it is a crime. It has been a challenge for me to learn to respect these differences. There is a course that we do in the first year of undergrad that helped me see things differently. (Student 1)

The findings highlighted differences in cultural norms, the complexities of violence, and issues of cultural authentication in dressing as some of the issues that cause stress and keep international cohorts away from exhibiting full potential in getting involved in teaching and learning, and general social life at the university. This is consistent with studies by Newsome

and Cooper (2016) and Costello (2019) who argued that people travelling abroad often experience intense emotions, especially when they are trying to adjust to unfamiliar academic, and cultural circumstances, as well as to a new sociocultural environment. Some of the documented challenges include a variety of personal and practical difficulties, such as day-to-day living (such as housing accommodations), cross-cultural gender relationships, social rules governing respect and politeness which most 'foreigners' find confusing, anxiety, social norms, depression, stress, cultural fatigue, and other cultural issues (Brown, 2008; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). Newsome and Cooper (2016) therefore argue that one of the most important factors in international student survival in a foreign host culture is social support as this assists them in adjusting their culturally based expectations to fit in with the new cultural environment.

Mental health concerns

It also became apparent that international students and staff sometimes battled with mental health issues when they moved abroad to join their universities. Participants claimed that international students and staff often felt isolated, invisible, anxious, and homesick, among other psychological challenges associated with being foreign internationals. One can draw from a student who noted,

...I often feel like a nonentity here – I am isolated and almost invisible. I have struggled to make friends and I am finding it difficult to cope. I feel like the university has not provided sufficient networking platforms for us...and also educating the local students and staff on how to be more welcoming and accepting of us as foreign nationals. (Student 5)

This was corroborated by another student who confessed,

I have these constant feelings of being out of place because of being in a new place and trying to adapt...in some instances, I feel like everyone is looking at me because I am the different one in my class and res [university residence]. I have been embarrassed and laughed at when I fail to pronounce some words...as a result, I find myself battling anxiety. I get so nervous when I get into spaces where there are many people. (Student 13)

A staff member also complained,

Being a foreigner can be quite challenging mentally because most of the time you feel excluded based on your nationality..you feel excluded. I often feel excluded and unwelcome in my department. I am saying this because when it comes to benefits in the university, foreign nationals are often sidelined – I mean being disregarded in terms of getting access to teaching and learning tools and other such things which can enhance teaching and social life. I have a colleague who has repeatedly tried to get a laptop and wifi router for almost a year, and he kept chasing shadows being sent from pillar to post, yet when another local lecturer joined recently, he was given these things as a priority. I can go on and on about these issues. I can mention accommodation issues here, and so many other things that make it difficult to cope and feel welcomed and accepted. The issue of internationalisation in this university is bothersome. (Staff 1)

A manager from the International Office also affirmed these experiences, adding that the onset of the COVID-19-related lockdowns was particularly devastating for international students. The manager admitted,

Over the critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were several challenges regarding mental health, especially among international students. While our local students had the opportunity to return home and have the benefit of family interactions, the restrictions on international travel made this impossible for international students and staff. The limitedness of physical connections with families made it very difficult for our international cohort. We were caught off-guard and international students felt the impact greatest when it comes to mental health. (Manager 3)

Further perspectives also revealed that the mental health pressures were being exacerbated by homesickness. This was well-articulated by a student who acknowledged, I tend to battle homesickness because of being far away from home. The cost of travel makes it very difficult for me to frequently visit home, even in cases where relatives die, and I fail to attend funerals. Getting closure in such situations is very difficult. My peers who come from communities closer to the university appear happier and mentally healthier. There is an emptiness that comes from being away from home and close relatives. (Student 8)

The findings suggest that although students and staff migrate in search of the proverbial greener pastures, this movement across international borders resulted in mental health costs such as isolation, invisibility, distress, homesickness, and other such psychological problems. These findings appear to find a correlation in previous studies that reveal that international students and staff are often neglected by their host communities because they are usually minorities (Brunsting et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014;). In the same vein, owing to the complexities associated with migration, psychosocial wellness is usually strained and exacerbated by factors such as perceived and actual social exclusion, stigmatization, and discrimination (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Forbes-Mewett, 2019; Schouler-Ocak et al., 2020). As advocated by Chen et al. (2020), it thus becomes imperative for universities and communities hosting international students and staff to reach out to this cohort in a culturally-sensitive manner.

Financial stresses

The findings also demonstrated that financial pressures constitute a significant challenge faced by international students and staff. Participants alleged that international students and staff regularly grapple with limited financial support from their families, the realisation of a higher cost of living, are prone to abuse in return for financial returns, and sometimes have to support their families with limited resources. An example can be drawn from a student who contended, Moving to a different country for study purposes is tough. Adapting to the new environment while studying is difficult, especially with the financial costs associated with it...most of us are from poorer countries and have come here in search of better opportunities, rarely do you find people moving to countries worse than theirs. Personally, my estimation of the cost of living

was below the reality I was confronted with, so I have had to work a couple of piece jobs to subsidize my living. (Student 16)

A staff member also reiterated this and remarked,

At this university, it is very difficult for some of us from neighbouring countries to be fully involved given that we are being sidelined from funding that's usually reserved for locals. As a result, the salary you receive has several competing interests – house rent, utility bills, taking care of relatives back home, then talk of the issue of publication costs too because such help is heavily tilted towards benefiting our local colleagues. The scales look like they set you up for a very serious struggle. (Staff 5)

Participants also revealed that manipulation and abuse were also commonplace as students grappled with financial well-being. This was adequately captured by a student who noted,

The honest truth is that we are easy pickings for abuse here. Financially, you tend to get manipulated because the ones with money can use you for their own benefit. I am talking about students, strangers, and staff here. My own academic supervisor has repeatedly forced me to do his work, his daughter's work, and other personal things just because he gave me a part-time job. Because he pays me, it is difficult to bite the hand that feeds you so I can say I have been abused like that repeatedly. (Student 2)

The financial pressures associated with being an international student were also detailed by a manager from the university's International Office who reasoned,

Our international cohort often struggles to adjust to the financial dynamics here. In some cases, you find that these students are expected to send money to support their families because of the realities of where they come from. I have spoken to many students who tell me that as soon as they earn money – be it a bursary, a stipend, or a salary, most of it goes towards supporting family members. The pressure to support home and maintain life here has caused some to drop out or fail in their studies. Survival often takes precedence, and studies are sometimes secondary. (Manager 1)

This was corroborated by another student who claimed,

You find that as a foreigner you have little to no access to bursaries. I know people who have started to lead immoral lives because of the pressure to survive – some have started doing assignments and research in exchange for payment, and some are into transactional sex relations just to remain afloat. All this comes from the pressure to survive because you know that your family can barely survive, let alone fund your studies away from home. (Student 6)

The findings revealed that international students and staff have a significant load of financial stresses that they battle owing to the many responsibilities they usually juggle while being in their host country. The findings are consistent with previous studies that demonstrate that the majority of international students and staff battle financial stress owing to stringent immigration laws that restrict access to employment, tuition fee burdens, and limited access to funding opportunities (Kono et al., 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Because of the multiple

responsibilities that are usually associated with migrants in general and student migrants in general, it is not uncommon to have international students and staff either working extra jobs to remain afloat or reorganising their lives to meet their incomes (Sherry et al., 2010; Titrek et al., 2016). Some of the financial challenges associated with international students and staff include having expenses that are more than savings, constantly worrying about financial resources, lack of savings, and increased problems with concentrating during classes because of financial difficulties (Daud et al., 2018; Robson & Wihlborg, 2019). It thus becomes essential for universities to be more transparent concerning the cost of living associated with their locales, particularly when it comes to clarity on fees, rentals, and other such expenses.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We set out to explore the challenges faced by international students and staff at a university located in rural South Africa. The findings from the study revealed that students and staff are confronted by challenges that significantly affect their adaptation to their host communities and these challenges included language hurdles, culture shocks, mental health concerns, and financial stresses associated with being in new environments. While internationalisation has been lauded for being a critical aspect of global universities, the findings reveal a worrisome outlook that needs to be addressed with the urgency it warrants. Granted, this study was limited to a small sample and cannot claim to have thoroughly unpacked the challenges faced by international students and staff, nevertheless, we move to make three broad recommendations in this regard. Firstly, there is an urgent need to implement behavioural interventions that will help ease the psychological disruption associated with student and staff migration – these could include setting up dedicated counselling services. Secondly, we recommend that because international students contribute a significant stream of revenue for universities, there is a need to establish a form of a financial cushion in the form of awards, bursaries, scholarships, and tuition waivers for excelling students – this would be essential in ensuring that the relationship is not exploitative. Finally, because of the cultural disruptions that happen through migration, there is a need for multicultural interventions for the international community and their hosts – this will help to improve social ties and ease some of the subtle tensions reported in this study and elsewhere.

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