

# INTERNATIONALISATION AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF NON-SOUTH AFRICAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

The internationalisation of higher education has resulted in an increase in student mobility from countries of their origin to experience a different kind of education elsewhere. South Africa absorbs most international students within Africa. According to Chasi and Quinlan (2021, 209) the Council for Higher Education reported that 6.5 per cent of the total number of enrolments in universities in South Africa are international students, which is a significant proportion of the student body. The success of these students contributes to raising the profile of South African universities as far as rankings are concerned as well as generating revenue for the institutions. This article explores the lived experiences of postgraduate international students at a university in South Africa. The aim of the article is to identify the opportunities and constraints that students experience, coming from outside South Africa to pursue postgraduate studies. Using Sen's capability approach, the article endeavoured to unveil conversion factors that international students encounter while studying for their postgraduate programmes. A qualitative approach was employed to generate data through interviews with students who had completed their postgraduate studies. The findings revealed the capability to study as a "doing" that mattered to the students with the intention of ultimately attaining their postgraduate qualifications. Experiences along the way included both enabling and constraining factors such as immigration, cultural adjustments, supervision and institutional factors. There is a compelling need to revisit the processes of admission and immigration regarding international students aimed at benefiting both students and institutions.

**Keywords:** access, capabilities, lived experiences, internationalisation, international students, success

## **INTRODUCTION**

Accessing higher education, specifically postgraduate qualifications, has increased in recent decades (Mutula 2009, 82). There is consensus on the instrumental role of higher education in advancing economic wellbeing, reducing poverty and promoting innovation (Chankseliani and McCowan 2021, 4). Universities globally have experienced significant increases in enrolment. Of special interest is the increase in enrolment of international postgraduate. Some of the factors that have led to the increase in the numbers of international postgraduate students include the lack of jobs in their respective countries and the search for rare skills that could only be obtained in countries outside of their own (Schoole 2011, 53). According to *The Mail & Guardian* (2021) as far back as a decade ago, the high demand for postgraduate programmes was a result of the prospects of boosting job prospects. With a high demand for jobs in the formal economy, the acquisition of higher qualifications is perceived to provide a competitive edge.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

There has been a high demand for jobs with a significant proportion of undergraduates in Africa remaining unemployed following graduation (Rogan and Reynold 2016, 345). To improve their chances of employment, there has been an increase in demand for postgraduate qualifications (Chandar, Jauhar, and Ghani 2015, 366), resulting in the migration of students to other countries for further studies. The rankings of institutions is a factor that students consider when deciding on postgraduate programmes (De Wit et al. 2015, 33). Such considerations advance the notion of internationalisation of higher education, which has seen a significant movement of students crisscrossing the globe in search of an education that will make them more employable. Most universities in South Africa rank high among universities in Africa, making the country a major hub for international students within Africa and beyond. However, little is known about their lived experiences from access through to their attainment of postgraduate qualifications.

## **AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this article is to explore the lived experiences of non-South African students from other countries in Africa from the point of accessing postgraduate programmes through to their completion to get an insight into how their experiences affect their prospects of succeeding and achieving their goal. The following objectives are explored:

- To identify factors that prompt students to study in South Africa;
- To discuss students' experience of accessing postgraduate programmes in South Africa;
- and

- To analyse the aspirations and conversion factors that international students encounter in the quest to achieve postgraduate status.

Under the first objective, the study explores both the aspirations of these international students as well as what matters to them and what they consider valuable in establishing themselves to be and do what they want. This encapsulates the capabilities of the students, which is further elaborated on in the theoretical framework section.

The second and third objectives reveal the opportunities and obstacles that they encounter in the pursuit of their studies as international students. Using the capability language, which frames the study, these experiences speak to the students' conversion factors as well as functionings (achieved capabilities), which are also discussed in detail in the theoretical framework section.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The study's results, within the context of the host country, will illuminate the challenges and opportunities encountered by international students pursuing postgraduate qualifications in South Africa. These findings have the potential to influence higher education policies, improving access to postgraduate education for international students and bolstering South African universities' international rankings by fostering increased mobility among students from around the world. Such positive developments will benefit the economy of the country through the revenue collected from international fees. Finally, from a capabilities approach and on the part of the students, an improved experience in accessing postgraduate qualification will contribute to the achievement of students' aspirations and functionings in getting the qualifications they value.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The growing demand for postgraduate qualifications**

The perceived need to pursue further studies beyond undergraduate qualification has seen many opting for further studies, either straight from undergraduate or rejoining after gaining some experience in the world of work. According to the *Mail & Guardian* (2021), undergraduate qualifications no longer receive the same level of esteem by employers as they previously did. As a result of the competition in the job market, the hiring landscape has changed, calling for upskilling of individuals to meet the market demand. Unlike undergraduate qualifications, postgraduate qualifications are perceived to equip individuals with skills such as critical

thinking, problem-solving and self-management, which according to the World Economic Forum (2020) are critical in the current day and age. Given the perception of knowledge and information as the primary catalysts for economic growth, Cloete et al. (2015, 89) argue that postgraduate qualifications and the function of higher education have emerged as indispensable prerequisites, emphasising the pivotal role of universities and advanced qualifications in today's economy.

### **Why international students?**

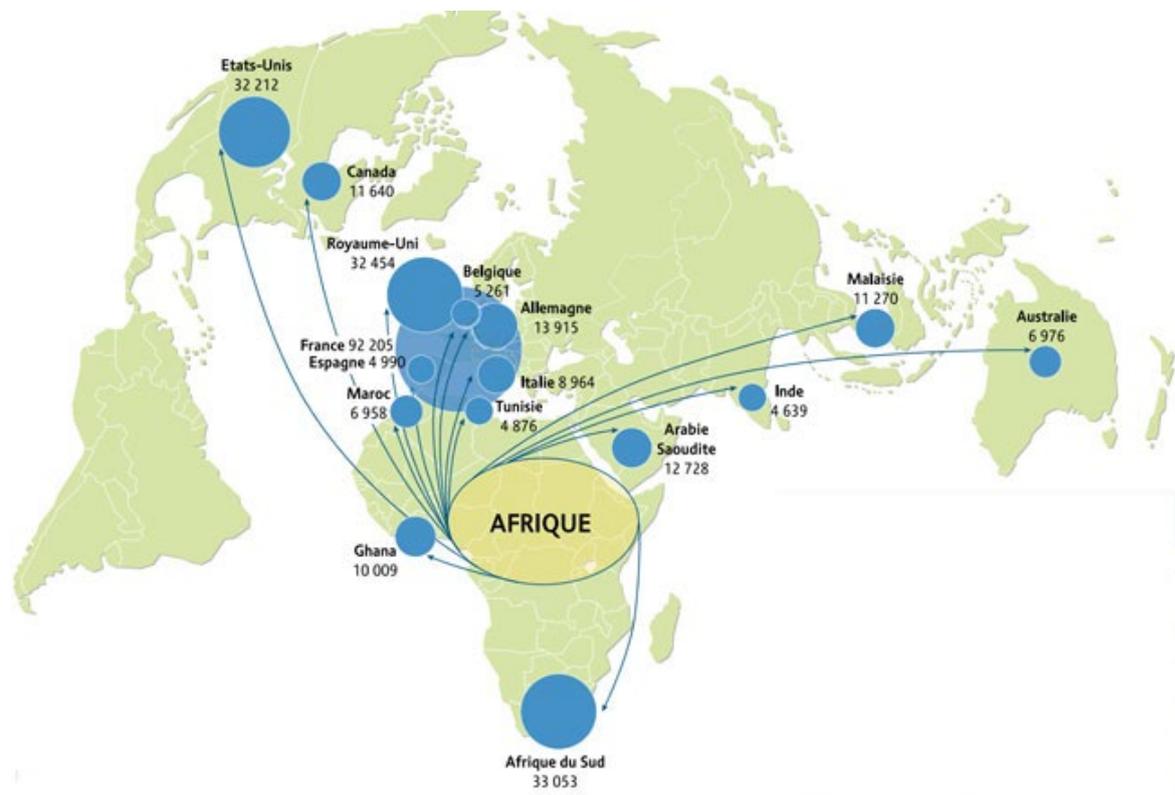
The world is becoming more and more interdependent and interconnected through technology, trade and other bilateral and multilateral arrangements (Calderon 2018, 198). Such developments have also become prominent within education. The effects of globalisation and the changes occurring around the world have influenced education (Popescu 2015, 412). The twentieth century experienced greater mobility of both students and academics across the globe, either in search of better education or employment opportunities.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2019, 9) described the internationalisation of higher education as, “an intentional or steered process to integrate or infuse intercultural, international and global dimensions in higher education; to advance the goals, functions and delivery of higher education and thus to enhance the quality of education and research”. Part of the process of integration and intercultural exchanges is in the flow of international students into higher education institutions. In addition to enhancing the integration and infusion of intercultural and international dimensions of higher education, internationalisation of higher education through student mobility contributes to additional revenue for the host countries (Adeoye, Anyikwa, and Avant 2012, 112). Maringe, Foskett, and Woodfield (2013, 12) emphasise the significance of internationalisation in Sub-Saharan universities, viewed as instrumental in economic and political agendas by fostering knowledge creation, cultural integration and global market values. Consequently, host countries stand to benefit both economically and in terms of academic rankings of their universities.

### **Internationalisation and South African universities**

Internationalisation of higher education is valued in the South African context, leading in 2019, to the development of a policy framework for internationalisation of higher education by the DHET. In the light of this framework, institutions of higher education in South Africa have been called upon to draw up a vision and policies for internationalising their programmes (Quinlan and Singh 2022). South Africa has for a long time been one of the leading examples of internationalisation in higher education, with students coming from all over the continent

and beyond to study at its universities. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, envisions South Africa as becoming a regional hub for higher education in the African continent (National Planning Commission 2012, 327). Figure 1 shows a graphic representation of the flow of international students of African origin which depicts South Africa as being among the top three destinations to which African students go for further studies.



**Figure 1:** Leading destinations of internationally mobile students from Africa (Source: UNESCO Campus France 2013)

With trends revealing that South African higher education plays a major role in receiving international students and the perceived role that the continued flow of these students has in benefiting South Africa, this article finds justification in delving deeper into exploring the experiences of these international students. In 2021, DHET expressed concern over the decline in the number of international students choosing South Africa as a study destination. Quinlan and Singh, (2022) reported a dwindling population of postgraduate international students from 15.82 per cent in 2015 to 12.94 per cent in 2020. The article hopes to contribute towards shedding light on the downward trend in the enrolment role of international student and whether the students' lived experiences would offer any meaningful explanation in ensuring that South Africa realises its NDP 2030 vision of being the major hub for higher education on the continent.

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**

The article is guided by Amartya Sen's capability approach from which the following constructs have been extracted: capabilities, functionings, aspirations, agency and conversion factors. The approach speaks to human wellbeing, which is conceptualised through people's capabilities and functionings. The capabilities are described as people's ability to do valuable acts or to attain valuable states of being. These states of being are manifested through things that people do and become (Nussbaum and Sen 1993, 32). On the other hand, functionings are the capabilities that have been achieved. Sen differentiates capabilities and functionings by looking at the former as the ability to achieve, and the latter as the eventual achievement. Aspirations are considered to be the precursors of capabilities and functionings. According to Hart (2019, 583), understanding individual aspirations is an important element in understanding how capabilities are developed, regarding the values that people attach to their intended "doings and beings".

For international students, the opportunity to leave their country to seek further studies is considered as a capability – something that they value to do and to be. This capability is driven by a desire or aspiration, which the article aims to reveal based on the students' lived experiences. The development of aspirations towards capabilities and capabilities translating into a functioning, (in the case of international students being able to successfully access, navigate and complete their postgraduate studies) is a journey that this article embarks on. According to the capability approach, the realisation of capabilities and functionings is determined by conversion factors. Robeyns (2021, 75) describes conversion factors as individuals' abilities to convert resources at their disposal into functionings. These conversion factors could either be enabling in the attainment of individuals' functionings or constraining, thus hindering the fulfilment of valued capabilities. Robeyns categorised conversion factors into personal, social and environmental factors.

Based on Sen's conceptual lens, this article explores how the international students' experiences could be conceptualised through their aspirations, agency, identified capabilities and realised or potential functionings. The different conversion factors are also assessed in presenting how the students' personal, social and environmental factors either play an enabling role or constraining role in the access and success of international students within South African higher education.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

The study adopted a qualitative methodological approach in data collection and analysis. According to Austin and Sutton (2014, 437), a qualitative approach gives access to a researcher

into the world of the respondents. One can appreciate the meanings and heart of the respondents based on their personal experiences. As opposed to the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach affords the respondent some leeway in expressing themselves in a less restricted manner, making the qualitative approach richer in terms of data collected. While criticised on the grounds of its subjectivity, qualitative researchers consider reality as being relative, rather than absolute, thereby affording varied perceptions to explaining a phenomenon. Stemming from an interpretivist paradigm, the article presents findings that aim at constructing social realities through the experiences of international students. As such, reality depends on the social actors' views, which form elements of meaning-making in understanding the bigger picture (Hesse-Biber, Nagy, and Leavy 2010, 27). In this regard, the views shared by respondents regarding their lived experiences as international students will contribute to building an understanding of the phenomenon of being an international student.

The research design adopted in this article was a phenomenological design that advocates for direct experience taken as is presented and links behaviour to individuals' experiences and centres on the experiences of respondents (Sloan and Bowe 2014, 1292). The choice of a phenomenological design is its ability to extract rich descriptions of phenomena related to specific matter. It could be argued that a phenomenological design enhances social justice by affording a voice to the marginalised. As international students, there is little research that has been done which directly involves them airing their voices. Thus, this article provides the opportunity for these students to share their experiences as a way of allowing an in-depth appreciation of their lives as international students.

The study focused on alumni international students that obtained their qualifications at South African public universities. The targeted sample comprised non-South Africans who had completed their PhDs or Master's programmes. The sample size was eight respondents who were purposively selected based on the above-mentioned eligibility criteria. An interview schedule was generated that was used the interviews with each participant. Table 1 provides a synopsis of the biodata of the respondents who took part in the study.

**Table 1:** Synopsis of the biodata of the respondents who took part in the study

Pseudonym	Gender	Country of origin	Programme completed
Ali	Male	Nigeria	PhD
Amani	Male	Kenya	Master's
Khadja	Female	Tanzania	PhD
Maya	Female	Malawi	PhD
Mike	Male	Uganda	PhD
Mulenga	Female	Zambia	Master's
Thabang	Male	Lesotho	Master's
Thandi	Female	Zimbabwe	Master's

Source: Author: Biodata for respondents

Online in-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents who were identified through purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. The data collected was analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological analysis. The analysis comprised of six steps including: reading and re-reading of original transcripts; extracting of relevant information; forming meanings from extracted segments; categorising codes into themes; developing a comprehensive description; validating findings through respondents and finally incorporating any feedback.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings from data collected were analysed and categorised into the following two main themes: motivation for postgraduate study and lived experiences.

### **Motivation for postgraduate study**

In responding to the question on what motivated the participants to pursue postgraduate studies, the findings revealed a combination of instrumental as well as intrinsic motivating factors. From the motivating factors, there was a combination of aspirations and capabilities. On the instrumental plane, the acquisition of an added qualification above undergraduate created an opportunity to compete for employment on the job market and provide higher chances of promotion (Mmadi 2022, 3). Most of the respondents aspired to attain postgraduate qualifications to widen their chances of getting jobs either in their countries of origin or in the countries that they went to further their studies. Thandi, who completed her Master's programme in 2021 put it this way:

“Back in my country, there were a lot of teachers that could not get proper jobs and I thought perhaps going to further my studies in South Africa would enable me to have an edge over those with only undergraduate degrees.” (Thandi).

The saturation of individuals possessing the first degree or Bachelor's degree has had implications for the chances of securing employment in the job market. Some scholars have attributed the situation to a possible mismatch between employers' sought-after skills and the skills that these graduates bring with them (Kadir, Naghavi, and Subramaniam 2020, 586). The problem of graduate unemployment has become widespread, with the situation worsening post-Covid-19 (Abd Rahman et al. 2020, 840). In Nigeria, almost 20 per cent of university graduates remain unemployed for an average of 5 years after graduation (Olorunfemi 2021, 103). With the concerns of either mismatched skills or absence of job openings, most people decide to

further their studies to increase their chances of employment. From the capability lens, therefore, the pursuit of postgraduate studies is an act of doing and becoming what the individuals value. It is a means to achieving the functioning of earning a postgraduate degree and earning themselves a dream job.

On the other hand, the intrinsic motivation for pursuing further studies confirms what capabilities approach purports. It considers education acquisition beyond the economic or functional benefit to being considered as a means of extending one's freedoms and wellbeing that may not be tied to economic returns. One of the respondents commented on what drove them to pursue postgraduate studies and in South Africa:

“I looked at pursuing postgraduate studies as a means of exposing myself to the world out there, and in a way, challenging my mental, psychological and emotional resilience, as one who had never gone beyond the borders of my country.” (Ali).

With the above case, the intrinsic motivation of curiosity and pushing oneself to unexperienced limits was enough to bring them to South Africa to study. As is the case with the capability approach, the conceptualisation of education as a capability and a functioning goes beyond other schools of thought such as the human capital theory whose view of education is narrowed down to the instrumental role of economic development (Van Loo and Rocco 2004, 99). Nkhoma (2021, 45) argues that the strict focus on education from the instrumental economic lens ignores the social, personal, political and cultural elements that are attached to education. It is the cumulation of all the factors, both instrumental, as well as intrinsic, that contribute to overall individual wellbeing.

The need to expand one's worldview came up as another prominent motivation for international students to study beyond their borders. The exposure to cultures and environments different from what they had been accustomed to, was a sufficient driving force for students to leave their countries and venture into what others considered “unknown territories”. Mike obtained his undergraduate and Master's degrees in his home country in Uganda and described his motivation to come to South Africa as follows:

“My whole life revolved around Uganda and mainly Kampala where I was born and raised. Having come as far as having a Master's degree made me consider broadening my horizons and venturing into a new environment and have a different experience of education and culture. This, I found enriching despite the challenges that came with it.” (Mike).

Proponents of internationalisation of higher education point towards the cultural diversity and richness that comes with student mobility. Such richness not only works to the benefit of the

in-coming students (international) but also the local students who learn about different cultures as they interact with one another. Lilley, Barker, and Harris (2015) discuss how internationalisation through student mobility is a form of learning experience for both international and local students through the exchange of culture and promotion of global citizenship learning.

## **LIVED EXPERIENCE**

In this section, the participants were asked to provide an account of their experiences in accessing postgraduate studies in South Africa. The responses were categorised into pre-arrival and arrival experiences. Within these categories, respondents presented various capabilities, opportunities as well as constraints that stood between their capabilities and the likelihood of translating these capabilities into functionings.

### **Pre-arrival experience – Decision on study destination**

As discussed in the previous section, the decision to leave their home countries to study in South Africa was a result of the different aspirations and motivating factors that manifested both as instrumental as well as extrinsic in nature. For most respondents, the choice of South Africa as a study destination was a result of perceived enabling factors. One of the respondents spoke to the geographical and personal enabling factors of being within the Southern African Development Community [SADC] region that heightened their chances of moving to South Africa for further studies:

“While most people would want to go to Europe or beyond for the further studies, I considered the advantage of location and proximity to home as a reason to come to South Africa. During my time as a student, I was able to travel by bus and visit my family back home.” (Maya)

The influence of geographical location and proximity is among the main determinants of students’ choice of study destination. Weisser (2016, 17) observed how geographical proximity entails more than distance in the choice of universities. It also speaks to cultural overlaps. The closer a student’s move is from their home country to the study destination, the more probable it is for them to experience less cultural shock as opposed to long distance moves. Such sentiments were acknowledged during the interviews as follows:

“Coming from a working-class background, where there was less exposure to the big world out there, when the opportunity to further my studies came by, I went for the place that could offer quality education but whose culture and environment were not as far-fetched from mine. South Africa was my number-one choice.” (Mulenga).

Speaking of cultural changes for international students, there has been a general consensus on how the move from home country to study destination has a way of affecting students as a result of their exposure to a culture and environment that is different from their familiar one (Goldstein and Keller 2015, 188). Presbitero (2016, 36) acknowledges the dissonance that international students experience as they try to adapt to a new way of doing things. Thus, the wider the gap in terms of cultural overlaps, the more difficult it becomes for students to adapt psychologically as well as socio-culturally.

### **Access**

Following the decision to study in South Africa, the academic process of access for the respondents entailed the formal inquiries made to the institution about a place, followed by the compiling of supporting documents, filling of online applications and uploading of supporting documents and finally, the submission of the application pack. There were mixed experiences regarding the whole process.

### **Search for supervisor-needle in a haystack**

The common experiences across the respondents included the challenging administrative procedures in navigating the application process as well as the quest to identify a supervisor. One of the respondents in describing his experience noted:

“The major problem came when I had to identify a supervisor. I was not aware of any of the processes and procedures to be followed. As a result, it took me more than a year to get a supervisor. I ended up calling people in very big offices without realising that they are in big offices, sending emails and phone calls to find out why I was not getting a response regarding a supervisor ....” (Mike).

The loss of a year searching for a supervisor had implications on the respondent’s plans, aspirations and opportunities. In one of the interviews, the respondent reported having lost a funding opportunity that was time-bound because of losing a year in application processes (Khadja). In another case one of the respondents admitted having come to the rescue of a friend that was struggling to find a supervisor:

“I noticed how frustrated and depressed my friend was with each passing day without word from the prospective supervisors. Seeing the deadline for closing of funding opportunity, I stepped in and talked to my supervisor about the situation of my friend and in the end, my supervisor was kind enough to take her on board as a supervisee.” (Ali).

Such administrative and procedural experiences presented negative conversion factors to students in that they threatened the likelihood of the students attaining their main functioning of obtaining their postgraduate qualification. The general experience of the respondents was the frustration of not having guidelines on how to identify supervisors. Even when applicants made efforts to contact prospective supervisors, the response rate was low and often late. While some respondents admitted to the challenge of finding a supervisor, the situation varied among them, with others admitting to not having to identify a supervisor themselves. In cases where identifying a supervisor was part of the prerequisite for admission, the ability of translating the capability to study onto the realisation of the functioning of earning a postgraduate qualification was threatened due to the struggles to identify supervisors. Most of the respondents indicated this as a challenge especially when making inquiries from outside the country.

### **Visa applications / renewal – the emotional struggle**

Alongside the supervisor challenges, were the bottleneck effects that international students encountered in the application process, the most prominent of which, was the visa application process. The respondents' experiences in this regard varied based on country of origin. One of the respondents, whose visa application had been rejected, attributed this to his country of origin as he stated that:

“Coming from Nigeria can be a blessing and a curse. The curse comes in as a result of the perceptions that people have about us. Everyone looks at us with suspicion, thinking we are always up to no good. And I am sure this is why my visa to study in South Africa was denied first time, even with all the documents submitted, including my university's proof of admission. I was not surprised to find other countrymen and women experiencing the same.” (Ali).

The sentiments of the above respondent align with findings from Biyela (2019, 68) who alluded to the stress factor that international students undergo in getting a study permit resulting from delays and rejections. Rodny-Gumede (2023) raises concerns about how the visa crisis in South Africa is threatening the internationalisation agenda, stating how the delays and rejections of visa applications inconvenience international students as well as international staff. The side effect of such challenges in return affect the institutions as they are left with little control over changing the situation. One of the respondents explained how the extra efforts and motivation by the supervisor and international office person at their university to get the visa renewal, did not work.

“My supervisor (shame!) did all he could to support my visa renewal, even got extra motivation from the international office at the university. Still, I got denied an extension and was ordered to

go back to my country and start the process afresh. I had lost money, as whatever is paid is non-refundable and on top of that, needed to source more money to get me back home to pay more money for the same process ... it was so painful! ...” (Maya).

The administrative element of access was of major concern to respondents. The main point of concern among the respondents was the extra expenses that they had to incur as international students as well as the expectations laid out in the application process. One of the respondents alluded to the seemingly unrealistic demands as exclusionary and elitist in nature as she remarked:

“Applying to South Africa for further studies and coming for some of our countries is not a luxury or a choice. Some of our countries do not have the resources to offer higher qualifications. But as one explores possibilities, especially within the SADC region where you would expect some multilateral arrangements and concessions among countries to allow for easier access to resources within the region, I realise that there is not much in place. As such, only those with excess can afford or if you are one of the lucky ones to get sponsored.” (Maya).

These experiences, which again entail negative conversion factors, resonated across the sampled respondents leading to shared sentiments about the need to revisit some of the demands made for international students. There was a general acknowledgement of the necessity of having the migration processes thoroughly done. Issues of efficiency and cost made some of the respondents recommend some consideration towards subsidising costs based on regional or continental arrangements for aspects such as visa processing and accreditation processes. Such strong sentiments were made on grounds such as the following:

“As fellow Africans and more so, members of the SADC region, I feel it would benefit both the international students as well as institutions if there was a revision in the cost implications of all the processes. While necessary, most of the students coming to South Africa may not be as affluent as in affording to pay all these costs and while it is to our benefit as students to get an international qualification, the host institutions benefit in terms of visibility, research reputation and the economy boost to the country.” (Mulenga).

## **NAVIGATING HIGHER EDUCATION AS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT**

Having conquered the challenges of admission and entry permits, the students had to begin their journey of pursuing their dream of realising the functioning of getting a South African postgraduate qualification. The experience and journey were characterised by conversion factors, some of which were enabling. On the other hand, there were those conversion factors that constrained or threatened their pursuit.

### **Adjusting as a postgraduate student**

This study identified three levels of adjustments that international students had to make to fit

into the new system. The first adjustment was the relocation adjustment. Coming from countries that were different from South Africa in terms of culture and level of development among other variables, there was a need to make some alterations in their ways of doing things. An example of such adjustments was:

“In my Master’s class, the majority of the students were South Africans and I was the only Kenyan in there. The big issue in the first days and months was communication. They preferred to communicate in either IsiZulu or Sotho. Even when having academic discussions, it always ended up in a language I could not understand. I felt so alienated.” (Amani).

Ralarala, Pineteh, and Mchiza (2016, 234) acknowledged the neglect of the language challenges that South African universities exhibit towards international students where, “instead of fraternising and paying attention to the needs and challenges of foreign students, staff and students at host universities tend to alienate them”. While looked at as an aspect of culture, language has a strong social element that enables people to connect and form relationships. The failure to break through the barrier of culture for many students leaves them distanced from the rest and is a cause for homesickness and depression among international students. Ngema (2021, 50) confirms how the transitioning of students from their home countries to South Africa is characterised by challenges of adjustments in relation to among others factors the language barrier, exposing them to feelings of frustration and depression.

While the issue of language was experienced by most of the respondents as a constraining factor, there were some respondents that saw it as an opportunity to stretch themselves by learning the new languages as a form of adjusting. Maya, who pursued her PhD during the COVID-19 period explained her experience, as follows:

“We had to leave campus accommodation within 72 hours. I had nowhere to go until a friend offered me a place in Soweto. The majority of Sowetans use IsiZulu as their lingua franca, and I said to myself, rather than feel disgruntled from being left out in conversations why not learn the language. By the end of COVID-19 lockdown, I got back to campus having learnt quite a bit of IsiZulu, able to follow conversations.” (Maya).

Using her sense of agency, Maya was able to translate what should have been a negative conversion factor into an opportunity to both improve herself and overcome the constraint. According to Robeyns (2021, 75), categorisation of conversion factors discussed in the theoretical framework section, language adjustment falls into two conversion factors. First is the social conversion factor, namely, the language barrier which for the most part, acts as a negative conversion factor in the realisation of international students’ functioning of attaining an international qualification. On the other hand, there is the personal conversion factor that

speaks to individual agency or one's ability to change their situation rather than reacting like a victim. In the case of Maya, the social conversion factor of language barrier affected her like the rest but rather than accepting the alienation, she made an intentional step of integrating herself into the community by learning the language, thereby, avoiding loneliness, alienation, homesickness and depression which could have affected her capability to study.

### **Supervision experience – A gamble**

As with the case of identifying supervisors, working with supervisors brought out varied experiences from the respondents. The common experience of almost all the respondents was the expectations that the respondents and their supervisors had of each other. Some respondents expressed great satisfaction with how their expectations of supervisors exceeded what they had anticipated:

“Hearing stories from friends on how difficult their relationships were with supervisors gave me anxiety knowing that with a Master's degree, I had to work closely with a supervisor. To my amazement, although I struggled finding a supervisor willing to work with me, this one was God-sent ... I have learnt and developed intellectually working with him. He gave me the time, read my work and critiqued my work in a way that got me thinking rather than thinking of myself as being dull.” (Thabang).

The relationship between supervisors and students at postgraduate level can be a major determining factor in student success and throughput (Lessing 2011, 932). Naim and Dhanapal (2015) posit that the way a supervisor and their student relate is pivotal in determining the success or failure of the students and whether they would graduate. Using the capabilities approach, the ability of a students to translate the capability to study for their postgraduate to the functioning of obtaining the qualification could be mitigated to a large extent by the supervision process. Depending on the quality, supervision could either be an enabling conversion factor or a constraining factor. Khadja's experience is an example of how supervision could play the role of constraining conversion factor:

“The experience with my initial supervisor was regrettable, halfway through my studies, I had to appeal for a change. My supervisor always belittled me. Made me feel I had wasted my time coming to South Africa to study. I cried every time we had supervision and regretted coming to study. Thankfully, I had a new supervisor who saw me through to my completion and graduation” (Khadja).

In the case of Khadja, there appears to be some personal conversion factor in the form of agency that drove her to take the initiative to appeal for a change of supervisors. While Khadja's

experience may have been extreme regarding the treatment and absence of supervision ethics that Harwood and Petrić (2016, 232) refer to, other supervision issues included continuous postponements of supervision as well as rushed supervisions. Thandi observed that:

“My supervisor was never strict with deadlines, I could submit my work and hear nothing from him for almost a month, only to be told that they had not looked at the work and needed three more weeks to get back. Luckily, there was a lecturer in the same unit that I would send my work to and get some critical feedback. She was not my registered supervisor though, but honestly contributed more than the actual supervisor.” (Thandi).

Another form of personal conversion factor in the form of agency can be observed in Thandi’s experience. Such practice resonates with what Grossman and Crowther’s (2015, 6) concept of “informal supervisors”, or individuals who carry out the supervisory role only in an advisory capacity. Some of such informal supervisors in the case of Mulenga and Mike, were fellow postgraduates who were ahead of them and in whose advice, they had developed confidence. The peer critiquing came across as a mitigating factor to supervisors’ perceived lack of devotion.

### **Institutional support**

Amidst all the experiences, respondents touched on the role their respective institutions played in contributing to their achieving the functioning of attaining a postgraduate degree. The main conversion factor that ran through the interviews was the initiatives that institutions offered to support postgraduate studies. Maya appreciated the seminars and workshops that her institution ran through the year.

“Often, we had seminars and workshops targeting postgraduates where we learnt a lot that benefited our research work. We had for example workshops on qualitative research, quantitative and mixed that were hands-on. It was an eye-opener hearing from the gurus on how it’s done benefited us a lot.” (Maya).

The supportive nature of institutions made the experiences of respondents manageable, thus, being an enabling conversion factor in the translation of their capability to study into a functioning to graduate. This supportive role of institutions has been alluded to as being one of the main factors that contribute to positive experiences of international students coming to study in countries away from home (Ammigan 2019, 266).

## **CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

The internationalisation of higher education has resulted in mobility of students globally in

search for knowledge and higher qualifications. There are different factors that cause students to relocate to countries to pursue postgraduate qualifications, including the search for better quality qualification, convenience, cost implications, conditions for funding and simply getting some form of exposure. In Africa, South Africa stands out as one of the dominant hubs for internationalisation of higher education with most of its international students coming from the continent. The study's focus on the lived experiences of international students in universities in South Africa revealed the value that international students attach to the capability to study as a means of attaining the functioning of graduating with a prestigious postgraduate qualification. For some, graduating was a means to further their prospects of upward mobility and improved wellbeing.

The study revealed various conversion factors that impacted the way students translated the capability to study to the functioning of graduating and attaining a postgraduate degree in both positive as well as negative ways. Such conversion factors ranged from policies regarding immigration, institutional processes of admission, social and environmental factors that speak to cultural shocks and adjustments as well as academic-related factors, mainly supervision and the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

The study identified a compelling need for institutions, higher education system and government stakeholders to revisit the processes of admission and immigration regarding international students with the intention of benefiting both students and institutions in fostering internationalisation of higher education.

The study's main limitation was that the scope of participants that focused on only African students. There may have been some variations with the inclusion of international students from beyond Africa, which this study did not include.

Further studies would therefore benefit from widening the scope of participants to include those beyond Africa. Another possibility would also be to compare experiences of Africa-based international students and those from beyond Africa.

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