

**Understanding International Student Mobility: What motivates African Student Choices?****Abstract**

This paper specifically attempts to clarify the factors influencing African postgraduate students to undertake higher education studies abroad. A sample of 94 international postgraduate students from Africa studying at University of Witwatersrand in South Africa was used in the analysis. The results show that conditions in both the students' countries of origin and in the possible hosting countries contribute to the decision to study abroad. Of prime importance among the factors attracting students abroad is the need to acquire education of international standing. The findings have wider implications on the marketing of the higher education sector in the continent and the important role it can play in dealing with the problem of brain drain in Africa.

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## **Understanding International Student Mobility: What motivates African Student Choices?**

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to clarify the factors influencing African postgraduate students to undertake higher education studies abroad. A sample of 94 international postgraduate students from Africa studying at University of Witwatersrand in South Africa was used in the analysis. The results show that conditions in both the students' countries of origin and in the possible hosting countries contribute to the decision to study abroad. Of prime importance among the factors attracting students abroad is the need to acquire education of international standing. The findings have wider implications on the marketing of the higher education sector in the continent and the important role it can play in dealing with the problem of brain drain in Africa.

**Key Words: Postgraduate students; Africa; Higher education; Internationalisation.**

### **Introduction**

Africa as a whole is generally experiencing a major human capital flight in the form of postgraduate students going abroad for their studies and choosing to remain there and work. This is particularly so in destinations such as Australia, UK, USA and Canada. According to the Australian Government (2005) these countries have in place deliberate policies aimed at attracting international postgraduate students to remain in their countries after successful completion of studies. They view export of postgraduate studies as a form of skilled migration that can strengthen competitiveness in key industries by addressing among other things the problems of ageing populations and skills shortages. A study by Seth (2000) as quoted by Shinn (2002) found that almost half of those who leave Africa do so to study abroad, 30 percent seek professional development and less than 7 percent leave for political reasons.

The authors believe that measures aimed at ensuring that more African students acquire their postgraduate studies within the continent would go a long way towards addressing the brain drain problem. The ability of African countries and their institutions of higher education to retain students wanting to study abroad will however depend on the capacity to understand the needs and wants of the market and develop appropriate strategies to help satisfy these needs and wants. There is unfortunately a lack of empirically based information that can enable a better understanding of the international students' market especially from an African students' perspective. This paper aims to investigate the factors that influence postgraduate students' decision to study abroad. Specific objectives include (a) to find out the extent to which different factors influence the decision to study abroad (b) to find out if there are any significant differences in the factors considered important in the decision to study abroad by different groups of students and (c) to highlight the implications of the findings on marketing of higher education services for Africa and its institutions of higher education.

### **Literature Review**

According to UNESCO (2008) only 5% of tertiary level students in sub-Saharan Africa are able to access higher education services compared to 70% in Western Europe and North America and a global average of 24%. A number of factors may help explain the gloomy picture of the higher education sector in Africa. Prominent among them are externally driven policies introduced in the 1970's by the IMF and World Bank in particular, that prioritised primary education at the expense of higher education on the basis that primary education unlike higher education

produces higher social returns (Brock-Utne 2003). The results of such policies were twofold; a) deterioration in the quality of local educational services that could be provided, and b) the resultant large numbers of students needing a University education which has provided for a highly competitive admissions requirements, often introduced in an effort to limit enrolments in line with capacity problems. In an effort to redress this problem, many African governments and external agencies have done some rethinking and now recognize that the rate of *return analysis* that was partly responsible for emphasis on primary education was inappropriately used and acknowledge the importance of higher education within the education sector as a whole. Efforts to revitalise higher education in Africa have since started gaining momentum. Despite the efforts taken so far there continues to be a large outflow of African postgraduate students to study destinations outside their countries of origin and to western countries in particular.

In comparison to other African countries South Africa appears to have fared differently, and is currently the leading exporter of higher educational services in Africa. Whilst much of South Africa's current appeal is that it was immune to the World Bank policies aimed at other African countries, prior to 1994 policies in the higher education were developed to serve the priorities of the apartheid separate development program with institutions differentiated along racial lines. Since the dawn of democracy in 1994 South Africa has been transforming its higher education sector to rid itself of its apartheid past. According to Schoole (2006) the country's higher education restructuring process has been largely guided by practices in industrialised countries in an effort to emulate international best practices. This has helped the country position itself as an 'African International Students alternative' to studying overseas.

The international students market has in recent years become highly competitive (Maringe, 2006; Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2005). It follows therefore that continued success in recruiting and retaining international students will thus depend on the ability of the country and its institutions to understand and provide for the needs and wants of the market. Mazzarol (1998) notes that the decision to study abroad is one of the most significant and expensive initiatives that students may ever undertake as a result requiring a lot of deliberation on their part. According to Mazzarol and Souter (2002) access related difficulties are the primary drivers to study abroad decisions on the part of most African and Asian students. Due to low supply capacity, highly competitive entry requirements may make it difficult for one to get a place in a course of interest (Kemp et al 1998). In many other cases the course of interest may not even be offered by home country institutions (Bourke 2000). Apart from access related problems, many other studies have found that quality of education on offer relative to that offered at home is one of the most important factors influencing the decision to study abroad (Cubillo et al 2006). Binsardi and Ekwulogo (2003) found that students choose to study in the UK because of its high educational standard and its recognised qualifications worldwide. According to Lascu and Giese (1995) service providers from developed countries are often preferred by consumers than those from developing countries except where lower prices are considered. Other studies have found that in many cases students believe that studying abroad especially in developed countries on the part of developing country students, can help enhance their future employment prospects as there is often a high status associated with overseas studies in developed countries (Lin 2007; Binsardi and Ekwulogo, 2003; Bourke, 2000). It is important to note that irrespective of the existence of favourable or unfavourable supply conditions in the students' home countries, students may seek international education because of other personal reasons such as the need to learn about new

cultures; practice foreign language and broadening of personal experiences (Bourke, 2000; Krzaklewska and Krupnik, 2005).

Arambawela et al (2006) note that factors influencing the choice of study destinations vary in terms of importance between different groups of students. Krzaklewska and Krupnik (2005) found that more female students, younger students and those coming from lesser developed countries respectively, were influenced by academic related factors than male students, older students and those coming from developed countries respectively. More students in the latter group were influenced by experience related factors such as meeting new people and having fun.

### **Research Methodology**

The data used in the analysis was collected in 2008 using an online survey sent to international students studying at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. The survey made use of a structured questionnaire examining various factors related to international study. A total of 14 factors were used in the investigation. These were identified through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and a review of the literature on the subject. A total of 94 usable responses were obtained from the postgraduate students. The sample size was considered adequate as it more than meets the minimum requirement of 5 cases per variable advocated in the data analysis literature (Tabachnick and Fidell 2001; Hair et al 2006). The sample was made up of 27 female and 67 male students. 43 students indicated that South Africa was their first country of choice in their decision to study abroad while 51 indicated other countries, mostly the USA (16), UK (15), Canada (7) and Australia (6). All the students cases in this analysis indicated other African countries as their countries of origin. The data was analysed using version 15 of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Mean values, factors analysis and independent sample-t-tests were the main statistical tools used in the analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results are discussed in terms of a) rank order analysis of factors associated with the decision to study abroad and b) an analysis testing for the existence of any significant differences in the ratings of the various factors between those students who indicated South Africa as their first country of choice in their decision to study abroad and those that indicated other countries as their first choice. Overall mean values were used to compute the rank order of the factors influencing the decision to study abroad. Taking 3 as the mid-point on a five point scale, all mean values closest to 4 (3.5) and above were considered more important; those closest to 3 were considered of moderate importance while those closest to 2 (less than 2.5) and below were considered to be less important factors in influencing students' decisions to study abroad.

Using the stated criteria, the results show that the most important factors are in the order of seeking qualifications with worldwide recognition; the want to broaden personal experience; high quality of education abroad; the perception that studying abroad can enhance future employment prospects and the want to have new experiences. Seeking qualifications with worldwide recognition stand out among the most important factors in that it is the only factor with an overall mean value of greater than 4. It is also worth noting that included in the most important factors are a mix of factors to do with both the quality of education on offer i.e. the academic side and also factors associated with the experience side of studying abroad. For example, many students felt that studying abroad offers them opportunities to broaden their personal experiences.

Table 1: Mean Values and Independent Sample t-test

Variable	Overall Mean	Group Mean		T-test for Equality of Means			
				t	Sig. (2 tailed)	95% Confidence interval of the Mean	
						lower	Upper
Seeking Qualification with worldwide recognition	4.05	RSA Other	3.95 4.14	-.74	.46	-.67	.31
The want to broaden personal experience	3.77	RSA Other	3.74 3.78	-.15	.88	-.56	.48
High quality of education abroad	3.69	RSA Other	3.88 3.53	1.46	.15	-.13	.84
Studying abroad can enhance future employment prospects	3.50	RSA Other	3.51 3.49	0.09	.94	-.52	.56
The want to have new experiences	3.48	RSA Other	3.49 3.47	.07	.95	-.50	.54
Unavailability of course at home	3.30	RSA Other	3.58 3.06	1.56	.12	-.14	1.19
Higher status associated with studying in economically more powerful countries abroad	3.00	RSA Other	3.09 2.92	.57	.57	-.42	.76
The want to learn about new cultures	2.99	RSA Other	3.09 2.90	.71	.48	-.35	.73
The want to be independent	2.62	RSA Other	2.37 2.82	-.43	.16	-1.08	1.75
The want to experience living in a more developed country than in home country	2.41	RSA Other	2.60 2.25	1.16	.25	-.25	.94
The want to practice/improve foreign language skills	2.23	RSA Other	2.19 2.27	-.32	.75	-.64	.46
The want to live in a foreign country	2.13	RSA Other	2.12 2.14	-.08	.94	-.57	.53
Highly competitive entry requirements in home country	1.80	RSA Other	1.74 1.86	-.53	.60	-.67	.39
Inability to get a place in a course you wanted to study at home	1.80	RSA Other	1.91 1.71	.71	.48	-.36	.76

Factors of least importance were the inability to get a place in a course one wanted to study at home and highly competitive entry requirements in home country. A number of reasons may help explain why these factors were rated the lowest. Firstly, it is important to bear in mind the context of the present study. The sample was drawn from students studying with the University of Witwatersrand, one of the premier universities in Africa and the world. University of Witwatersrand is often ranked among the top 5 universities in African and the top 400 in the

world (IEASA, 2009; Webometrics, 2009). It would thus be expected that students gaining entry to such a university would not be those that would find it difficult to gain entry in most other Universities. Secondly, it is also important to bear in mind that a good number of students had indicated the in-availability of an appropriate course in their home country as one of the factors influencing their decision to study abroad.

After analysing the overall means values, an independent sample t-test was run in order to find out if there were any significant differences in the mean values between students who indicated South Africa as their first country of choice and those that did not. The results show that although there were differences in the overall rank order of the factors between the two groups, there were no significant differences in the ratings of each of the 14 factors. This means that students who consider South Africa as a preferred study destination and those that prefer other countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia are influenced to a similar extent by the various factors considered.

The findings of the study have a number of implications on marketing of a country and/or its institutions to international students especially those coming from other African countries. African students are not very much interested in studying abroad for the sake of living in a foreign country per se, whether developed or not, but rather because of the benefits found through study abroad. Of primary importance is the fact that in going abroad, students are looking for qualifications with wider recognition and opportunities to broaden their experiences. Efforts aimed at improving the quality of educational services on offer would go a long way in ensuring that efforts aimed at attracting more international students to study within the continent as a measure towards reducing the problem of brain drain in the continent is successfully addressed. Players in these efforts, be it governments, institutions of higher education as well as individuals working in the sector need to bear in mind that they are part of a competitive global market of institutions attracting international students from all parts of the globe. Quality improvements therefore need to take into consideration internationally accepted quality standards in teaching, research, facilities and other support services on offer to students. It is important to bear in mind that the ultimate aim is to ensure that a hosting country and institution is able to provide students not only with good quality academic qualifications but also to ensure that their overall experience during their stay in the country is rated favourably. International students who have had a good time in a country and/or an institution are likely to talk well of the country/institution and can thus be a valuable marketing resource for the country/institution.

#### **Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research**

This paper was aimed at understanding factors that motivate African students to seek their postgraduate studies outside their countries of origin. A number of factors can help understand this decision, however of primary importance is the fact that students are looking for qualifications that are widely recognised. Knowledge of the various factors is of critical importance for the development of marketing programs aimed at attracting more international students from Africa. The main limitations of the study includes the relatively small sample size used in the analysis; the fact that the sample comes from only one university and the high skew of the sample towards male students. Future research can take these limitations into consideration and try to undertake a similar study using students from a number of universities and ensuring that there is a good balance between different groups of students, such as gender.

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