

# Inclusion and Exclusion in Higher Education: What Are the Factors Influencing Discrimination Against International Students in South Africa?

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The South African higher education system is one of the most diverse systems in Africa with a high percentage of international students. Yet, there are many factors that create discrimination against these individuals and those who would aspire to further their education in South Africa. The diversity found within universities creates an environment where all different opinions can be heard which allows for vibrant discussion among classmates and professors alike. Unfortunately, this lack of representation also has its downsides as some schools do not have enough resources or staff members dedicated specifically to foreign student needs leaving them feeling marginalized on campus. This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of factors affecting the discrimination of international students in South Africa. It also improves our empirical knowledge of two major factors: lack of familiarity with backgrounds outside one's own culture or country as well as religious differences within communities which may lead to biases based on religion rather than other qualities such as appearance or language fluency; but it remains unclear if these disparities exist due to prejudices held by individuals at school for reasons unrelated to racism (though cultural difference already increases exclusion).

*Keywords:* immigrant student, prejudice, xenophobia, racism

## Introduction

Since 1994 when it embraced a democratic state, South Africa, has become known as the Rainbow Nation. Thanks to massive efforts and focused programs, it has emerged as an important destination for business but more importantly for the purpose of this research for international students. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2012), more than 6,000 international students were enrolled in South African universities, and of those, nearly 4,000 studied on campus. However, for this trend to continue, a major challenge needs to be addressed. While there are considerable investments and efforts devoted to attracting international students, far less attention is being paid to the students' experiences once they arrive at the host institution. There is reason to be concerned about how well these international students are being integrated on campuses and ensure that their issues relating to discrimination are properly addressed. These challenges need to be effectively addressed so that this great trend can continue. Given the recent changes in the South African higher education system and the growth of international scholars from within the continent, it is befitting to

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consider the various factors influencing discrimination and take into consideration the challenges faced by international scholars. South Africa is known as the economic engine of Africa and will have so much more to offer—for everyone in Africa—once this is resolved.

Across the world, there are strongly held beliefs that foreign students must learn to fit into their new environment of their own volition. Thus the responsibility is put entirely on them when it comes to achieving positive outcomes. According to Church (1982), research shows that international students must conform to their host country and gain skills that permit them to temporarily and successfully adapt to what is an unfamiliar context for them. At the base of this research—well represented by Bevis (2002), is the assumption that international students are entirely responsible for outcomes. No blame is ever ascribed to host institutions or host societies. At the same time, opposing researchers contend that international students cannot be blamed for all matters of adaptation. For instance, according to other researchers such as Lee and Rice (2007), some of the gravest challenges can be blamed on the host society's inadequacies with perceived cultural discrimination, verbal insults, and physical assaults experienced by international students, both inside and outside the university, as prime examples as such it represents major missed opportunities!

Research also shows that foreign students from specific countries such as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America typically experience more prejudice than their counterparts from other nations. According to Lee and Rice (2007), as well as Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), foreign students of color in the US report more perceived discrimination than their white counterparts.

The study found that many people who are not familiar with other cultures may not understand what appropriate or inappropriate behavior is when interacting with a person from another culture. Foreign students of color reported feeling discriminatory treatment because they were unfamiliar due to language barriers, clothing choices, mannerisms, etc. On average, these respondents had two experiences per week where someone acted inappropriately towards them based on prejudice against race/culture. Sex also comes into the picture. There is a growing body of evidence on the discriminatory and racist experiences faced by international female students from Africa and Asia studying in Western nations.

According to Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) and Hayes and Lin (1994), although many factors impact on international student's ultimate success at an institution, two of the most commonly cited are the types and quality of interaction with faculty and staff as well as the types and quality of interaction with other students. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) highlighted the fact that interaction between international students and faculty, both formally and informally, has had a positive effect on educational achievements.

The Victoria University of Wellington study (2006) presented a fascinating look at the role that culture plays on the perceptions that faculty friendliness and quality of interaction have on outcomes. As previously mentioned and in Hanassab's research (2006), a mounting body of evidence indicates that people from specific cultures had more discriminatory experience with their professors, than their counterparts.

### **Problem Statement**

South Africa is not alone with major issues of discrimination. As shown by extensive research—as highlighted by various researches such as Rhodes University (2006), discrimination is alive and well in many institutes of higher learning across the globe, adversely affecting international students and their success rate: Participants in a focus group at the University of North Carolina (USA), comprised of international scholars from China, Kenya, Sri Lanka, India, and Iran described discrimination as what they experienced a lot on their

campuses, to them discrimination is “biased treatment” and different treatment based on characteristics such as color, sex, and being “foreign” (Rhodes University, 2006). It is generally understood and accepted that international students will have adjustment problems as they seek to integrate in the host nation. According to Berry, Kim, Minde, and Mok (1987, p. 491), in comparative studies of acculturative stress, international students cannot escape feeling homesick, experiencing integration problems, voice communication, family worries, finance, culture shock and change during their stay. Coming from different nations, international students may confront many troubles in their everyday life. Besides their safety and having to learn to integrate with a new nation, international students are confronted with the reality of needing to find homes to survive, finding banks to deposit and withdraw money and finding suitable transportation (e.g. finding buses or buying cars to go around) and applying for credit cards which they may never have had to do previously. According to Berry et al. (1987, p. 491), students are immensely challenged as they find themselves immersed in the new culture; further findings also suggest that local students worry that international students pose threats to their economic, educational, physical well-being, beliefs, values, as well as social status—because of prevailing anti-immigrant biases.

Therefore all of this poses enormous threats to these foreign students’ success—short and long time. In surveys conducted by Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), Hayes and Lin (1994), and Charles and Stewart (1991), discrimination is observed as a critical element that defines the success of international students completing degrees in American educational institutions. Discrimination, it seems, is like a wild card that adversely affects the future success of these students, and their ability to learn, never mind their future possibilities. In recounting the above-mentioned, the primary purpose is to find out what the undergraduate students at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) understand and identify as factors contributing to the discrimination of international scholars and affecting their ability to succeed. UJ being perceived as a leading university, they need to identify problem areas so they can quickly address the issues and continue to impact positively on Africa and students.

It is critical to help the university shape different areas dealing with discrimination, thus eliminating pressing challenges faced by international students in South Africa and positively affecting success rates.

This is an imperative because of UJ status as a higher learning institute enrolling a number of international scholars from different nations worldwide. This work will concentrate on the voices of UJ undergraduate students so as to identify several factors influencing discrimination of international students in South Africa. The foregoing leads to project research question “what are the factors influencing discrimination against international students in South Africa?”.

## **Literature Review**

### **Definition of Discrimination**

Let’s first agree on the meaning of the word “discrimination”. According to Sodowsky and Plake (1992), discrimination has to be with one’s interpretation of being subjected to prejudicial treatment. With regards to international students, it is oftentimes connected with ethnicity and regions of origin, therefore, discrimination is often linked to country of origin and the host country. However, this study will consider the discrimination factors faced by international students in their academic spaces. Thus the term prejudice will refer to discrimination that takes place amongst students in their learning environment.

### **International Students**

For a start, let's understand that in South Africa, foreign students are oftentimes seen in a negative light—from the time they first arrive. OECD (2010, p. 1) defined international students as those who have crossed borders for the purpose of studying abroad. International students are often described as being a boon to the economy, especially in countries where they have fewer opportunities.

International students are commonly touted for their purchasing power and ability to create jobs with little forethought or effort on behalf of those who employ them. International students are often described as global citizens. They live in their host country for an extended period of time, making them more aware and invested in the culture's politics than someone who is only there temporarily or on vacation. They all hope to one day become ambassadors between their home countries with friends from other lands they have met while studying abroad.

### **Historical Overview of Discrimination Against International Students in Higher Education**

Since the early '80s, many researches have been carried out to study international students experience in their host country, along with their coping strategies. For instance, Berry et al. (1987) started examining acculturation and discrimination which international students faced in their host nation and their "coping strategies". More recently, we have had access to research from such people as Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung (2008) that looked into adjustment issues of international students—what has changed essentially is the lens through which researchers have viewed international students—from clinical to a developmental perspective. A few other studies performed by various scholars have documented the tremendous hardships experienced by international students, not only in the United States, but across the world. However, most of these research papers are skewed. They assumed from the onset that the problems stemmed completely from the international students' inability to successfully "adapt" or "cope"—putting full responsibility on the international students' ability to persevere, overcome such challenges on their own, and then integrate into the host society. Never mind the fact that major opportunities were being missed. According to a variety of researchers such as Aldridge and Rowley (2001), non-academic challenges faced by international students have received considerably less attention than traditional academic issues—in spite of a growing body of evidence pointing to the contrary.

According to Butcher and McGrath (2004) and Brender (2004), this phenomenon has also been documented in New Zealand, Australia, and Japan. According to research findings by Frey and Roysircar (2006), discrimination and prejudice significantly impact international students' overall wellbeing thus highlighting a significant, but under-researched area pertinent to both students' formal university experiences and experiences based on the larger social context of the host country. Research conducted by Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) as well as Lee and Rice (2007) shows clearly that specific international students experience higher levels of discrimination than their domestic counterparts be it from professors and fellow students, as well as from community members whom they encounter in public spaces and the broader community.

South Africa faces pressing economic problems which can be said to have had an adverse impact on the higher education system and its students. To date, xenophobic sentiments in South Africa are widespread and continue to be cause for concern. According to Bloch (2010), anti-immigrant sentiments became pronounced in the early 1990s, when South Africa transitioned into democracy and experienced an increase in immigration from other African countries. Since then, the number of undocumented attacks on immigrants has been on the

increase—according to Crush (2000), across South Africa. As well as mentioned by other people such as Amisi, Bond, Cele, and Ngwane (2011), many negative perceptions around foreigners in South Africa are entertained and presented by research and the media or both. According to Nattrass and Seekings (2001), one such survey indicated that the majority of respondents were of the view that immigrants take away local jobs, engage in crime, and bring diseases into the country unfortunately fueling negative perceptions! Danso and McDonald's (2001) assessment of the media's coverage of international migration revealed that the majority of the media assume an uncritical anti-foreigner stance on issues surrounding immigrants and immigration. It is also noteworthy that more prejudice appears to be directed at black Africans—in particular, where black immigrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo appear to be targeted (Morris, 1998).

According to a DoE (2008) "Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions", while racism continues to be a problem in universities, xenophobia, sexual harassment, and sex discrimination are equally pervasive. More specifically, tensions between South African students and students from other African countries have been apparent at historically black universities. Unfortunately, according to Badat (2010), universities in South Africa continue to succumb to external conditions linked to the wider society.

### **Race and Discrimination**

As is well known, most black South Africans were prevented from entering higher learning institutions compared to their white counterparts. This has influenced the way South Africans welcome individuals from other racial groups. Moge kwu (2005, p. 10) argued that ethnicity divisions in higher learning institutions are still visible in spite of South Africa now being a democratic country. The South Africa National Planning Commission recognizes that the university sector is under substantial pressure to change—as race still remains a determining factor of graduation rate. This has major consequences for social mobility and overcoming the inequalities of the previous political system. Furthermore, race is not easily subjected to the borders of South Africa, as racial discrimination takes a new form in higher learning institutions with the admission of students from countries outside South Africa. Pascarella, Cruce, Wolniak, and Blaich (2004) contended that the ongoing enrollment of diverse students on campus brings about discrimination and ethnicity to those entering higher learning institutions. For instance, Dodson (2010) argued that xenophobia initiates discrimination that is largely practiced by black South Africans towards black non-nationals giving it a new term, namely "Afrophobia".

### **Conclusion**

Although a lot can be said about the discrimination experienced by foreign students in South Africa, few studies have studied the problem in detail and within the context of the challenges which the new democracy is facing to provide the needed resources/solutions to redress the past and adequately support their own people. At present, there is no proper research done around issues of religion and terrorism influencing discrimination against the local people or foreign student, which is except for scant analyses conducted by some scholars here and there. More importantly, there is no conceptual framework in the literature for the continued systematic study of discrimination towards international students, along with the adverse impact it is having on the country and the resultant missed opportunities. There is no telling what immense benefits could be gained from such research.

Recently the president of the United States, Donald Trump, ordered a ban on citizens of seven countries preventing them from entering the US. The order itself does not name the countries whose citizens are banned from entering the United States. Instead, it refers to a statute which applies to seven Muslim-majority nations. They are Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and Iraq, with dual nationals included in the ban. Certain visa categories, such as those for study, are included. There have also been reports of legal US residents, known as green card holders, being turned away from US-bound flights (Telegraph News, CNN, February 2017). I see this as a major gap in the existing methods and procedures for researching discrimination that if not addressed, might hinder the progress for continued studies in this area and result in adverse consequences for society. After careful review of the existing literature on international students and discrimination, I have determined that there are major areas of significance where international students experience discrimination. In my opinion, the literature suggests that the student's experience with language and social economic status, sex, race, religiosity, the student's interaction on campus are the primary areas that are significant in the discussion factors influencing discrimination towards international students. This leads us to draw five hypotheses which show that there is a relationship between language, race, sex, religiosity, and economy status—as factors that influence the discrimination of international students in South Africa. Plus, it has many adverse effects on the country and its ability to redress past issues—as quickly and cost-effectively as possible.

### **Interpretations of the Findings**

The finding in this study pointed out that the sex of UJ undergraduates' students does not play a role in their perception of factors influencing discrimination of international students. Which contradicts what Badat (2010) argued that while both male and female Malaysian students have equitable opportunities to embark on a career path and professional development outside their home country, these equitable conditions should not blind the education sector to the sexed differences in the way males and females experience this educational opportunity. Of salient importance is the fact that women experience many issues and challenges—especially around racism and discrimination—as students in host countries. Although there are differences between the sex groups, we saw that more female responded and their respond to the question was to a medium extent; the relationship was not significant enough to hold as a factor for discrimination of international students in South Africa.

The finding for race illustrates that there is no relationship between race and factors influencing discrimination of international students, therefore, it can be concluded that a person's race does not have any significant relationship on factors influencing discrimination of international students, which means it doesn't matter whether one is black south African or other non-black south African; it doesn't affect the factors that discriminate international students in south Africa.

Furthermore, we tested other variables like home languages and social-economic status using Kendall's tau and correlation. The significant difference was very small therefore we conclude that we reject the null hypotheses of both factors which are not correlated with literature finding which states that socio-economic status is one of the factors influencing discrimination of international students, according to Lareau and Horvat (1999) who stated that low maternal education and minority-language status are most consistently associated with fewer signs of emerging literacy and a greater number of difficulties in preschoolers. As a result, children from families with low socio-economic status are at greater risk of entering kindergarten unprepared compared to their peers from median or higher socio-economic status. It is clear that discrimination—especially xenophobia—needs to be viewed within the context of a society with strong and negative feelings towards a

system that appears to be failing them. Furthermore, concerning home language, Krahé, Abraham, Felber, and Helbig (2005) also discussed the issue of language proficiency and discrimination. The researchers all agree that a person's fluency with the host language is a large determining factor with respect to discrimination experiences. Hayes and Lin (1994) mentioned that the inability to speak the host language proficiency is a strong barrier to multicultural exchange between the student and native speakers. The Victoria University of Wellington study (2006) also mentioned that language often acts as a barrier to understanding, especially in the classroom. In contrast there is no relationship between sex, race, religiosity, home language, socio-economic status and factors influencing discrimination of international students in South Africa.

### **Limitation of the Study**

This study focused on the factors influencing discrimination of international students of UJ undergraduate students at Auckland park campus only rather than focusing on the entire population of students from UJ in all the four campuses. With the population consisting of undergraduate students who have sociology as one of their modules, thus excluding other undergraduate students at UJ. Some of the limitation of this study was based on whether the participants were truthful, and if the participant was aware of the importance of the study, in addition, when conducting the interview, I have to deal with huge queries from the participant at the same time, which was difficult and resulted in the interest of some of the students when answering the questionnaire. It was difficult to tell whether students were being honest in answering the questionnaires, as some students voiced their opinions with their neighbor. Moreover, the sample was not well represented based on some of the variables, for instance the study comprised of more females than males. The study had an equal distribution of racial categories, with black participants taking up majority of the numbers.

### **Recommendation**

The study needs to include perceptions which represent UJ students from all campuses regardless of whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate students. In addition, more assistance should be allocated during the time when the actual interviewing takes place, or one-on-one interview should be implemented rather, so that the participant receives all the attention and so that the researcher can keep up with the participant. The research questions and qualitative and quantitative questions can be asked, so that the participants can voice their opinions.

### **Conclusions**

University of Johannesburg (UJ) enrolls a number of international students, whom undergo a great degree of adjustments when entering the institutions, thus these adjustments may have an impact on their academic progress. Therefore, in reference to a study conducted on Mexican population enrolling in higher institution in the United States of America, this study strived to find out if the type of segregation that took place in the United States towards the Mexican population takes place at UJ, therefore, the study focused on the factors of UJ undergraduate students and factors influencing discrimination of international student in South Africa. Hence, while the literature indicates different perceptions that South African citizens may hold towards non-nationals, that may transcend to higher learning institutions. Moreover, literature indicates the extent of exclusion, inclusion and marginalization of specific groups, with international students facing a degree of exclusion by local individuals that hold certain perceptions about them.

Therefore, local individuals may hold prejudice perceptions towards international students that can be transported by race, sex, home languages, socio-economic factors, and religiosity. Literature indicates that these variables have an impact on the way in which non-nationals are accommodated, moreover, in answering the research questions. A quantitative approach was implemented to see if this was true in the case of UJ undergraduate students. The finding illustrated that variables like sex, race, home languages, religiosity, and socio-economic status do not have any impact on factors influencing discrimination of international students in South Africa.

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