

Evaluation of the Obstacles Encountered by South African International Students in Tertiary Educational Institutions

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Abstract: The South African higher education system has seen a gradual rise in the number of international students, mainly from African countries but not exclusively confined to other nations. Although the number of international students has significantly risen in recent decades, there is less knowledge about the obstacles they face and the potential effect of these issues on them. This research aims to comprehensively evaluate the difficulties encountered by international students at higher education institutions, providing insight into the complex obstacles that affect their academic, social, and cultural assimilation. The study utilizes a qualitative approach, incorporating a questionnaire as the research design to collect perspectives from international students. The findings indicate that communication, finances, environment, access to resources, and administration are factors that contribute to the obstacles encountered by international students. This highlights the necessity for specific support mechanisms and policy adjustments to improve the overall educational experience for this expanding demographic. The results of this assessment provide important insights for educational institutions, governments, and stakeholders that want to promote inclusive and supportive settings that facilitate the achievement and well-being of international students in higher education.

Keywords: Higher Education, South Africa, International students

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of global migration and cultural shifts has led to a notable increase in the diversity of students and faculty members at academic institutions worldwide (Altbach, 2013). These emerging patterns have presented novel difficulties for university educators and students. Consequently, a higher proportion of university students come from a range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Altbach, et al., 2019). Some of these individuals may be regarded as academically challenged in their potential to achieve success in their studies. According to the study conducted by Zalli, (2024) and Altbach, et al., (2019) higher education for young individuals encompasses several aspects, including the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the cultivation of a scholarly mindset, the establishment of social connections, the nurturing of aspirations, the formulation of professional plans, and the preparation for future life. Clark (2024) asserts that within the realm of higher education institutions, students encounter several challenges and anticipate effective resolutions for these predicaments. The prevalent issues faced by individuals in higher education worldwide include academic, cultural, emotional, and economic challenges. Many nations develop and enforce many policies to tackle the problems in higher education and facilitate students' adjustment to the higher education milieu, enhancing their chances of success (Sam, 2024). When examining the challenges encountered by individuals pursuing higher education, particularly those who come to study in an international nation, it seems that these difficulties vary in magnitude.

In South African perspective, presence of language hurdles is a notable challenge, especially for students who come from non-English-speaking backgrounds, given that English serves as the main mode of teaching (Gukurume, 2024). This may have a detrimental impact on their capacity to actively participate in lectures, contribute to debates, and achieve high performance in examinations. International students often encounter challenges in cultural adaptation, struggling to acclimatize to the local traditions, social conventions, and the rich cultural milieu of South Africa (Woldegiorgis and Chiramba, 2024). Furthermore, the process of social integration might be arduous because of disparities in social customs and the possibility of encountering xenophobic sentiments, both of which can contribute to sensations of seclusion and marginalization (Aberra, 2024). Financial limits are a significant obstacle for international students, who often encounter elevated tuition prices and living expenses (Woldegiorgis and Chiramba, 2024; Namuwonge, 2024). These challenges are further exacerbated by the restricted availability of financial assistance and part-time employment alternatives (Gukurume, 2024).

Additionally, bureaucratic obstacles, such as the acquisition and upkeep of student visas, further complicate their experience, contributing to the anxiety and lack of assurance (Sivapalan, and Khan, 2024). The complex problems underscore the need for South African higher education institutions to establish strong support mechanisms to improve the academic and social welfare of international students. The results of this study are

crucial for guiding the creation of specific initiatives and policies designed to enhance the support systems inside higher education institutions. The primary objective of the research is to enhance the development of educational settings that are more inclusive and equitable, so enabling them to effectively cater to the different requirements of international students.

2. Literature Review

International students at higher education institutions often encounter a range of obstacles that can significantly impact their academic success and overall satisfaction (Zalli, 2024; Altbach et al., 2019). One of the most prominent challenges is the language barrier. Students from non-English-speaking countries may struggle with understanding lectures, writing academic papers, and participating in classroom discussions (Xiao, 2024). This difficulty often leads to feelings of isolation and frustration as students find it challenging to communicate effectively with peers and professors. Andrade (2006) highlights that language proficiency is a key factor in the academic success of international students, as it directly influences their ability to comprehend course material and engage in academic conversations. Furthermore, language barriers can hinder social integration, making it difficult for international students to form personal relationships and participate in extracurricular activities—important elements of a well-rounded educational experience (Poyrazli, and Grahame, 2007).

Another significant challenge faced by international students is cultural adaptation and homesickness. Moving to a foreign country requires adjusting to a new cultural environment, which can be overwhelming and anxiety-inducing. Many international students experience culture shock when exposed to unfamiliar customs, social norms, and academic practices. This transition can be particularly difficult for those with limited prior experience abroad. Research by Ward, et al., (2001) suggests that cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings, which in turn impede students' ability to interact effectively with local peers and faculty. Additionally, the absence of familiar support networks, such as family and friends, can intensify feelings of loneliness and homesickness, negatively impacting mental health and academic performance (Sawir et al., 2008).

Financial difficulties are another major challenge for international students in higher education. These students often face higher tuition fees compared to local students and have limited access to financial aid or scholarships. Chen (2017) argues that the financial strain of studying abroad can create significant psychological stress, which may interfere with students' ability to focus on their studies. Moreover, restrictions on work permits often limit international students' opportunities for part-time employment, further exacerbating their financial difficulties. This financial burden may force students to cut back on essential expenses such as healthcare and nutrition, adversely affecting both their academic performance and overall well-being (Beine, et al., 2014). The combination of financial pressure and academic demands creates a challenging environment that can hinder international students' success in higher education.

Communication difficulties also arise during both pre-registration and post-registration stages, as international students often struggle to understand complex university procedures and requirements. These challenges are frequently intensified by language barriers (Watson et al., 2024). International students may find it difficult to navigate registration processes and academic regulations due to differences in educational systems and language proficiency, which can lead to misunderstandings and delays in enrolment (Spencer-Oatey, and Xiong, 2006). Additionally, environmental challenges such as adjusting to new climates, cultural practices, and social norms can further complicate their ability to focus on their studies (Ward, et al., 2001).

Access to university resources, such as libraries, technology, and support services, is another hurdle for international students. These resources are essential for academic success, yet students may face difficulties in utilizing them due to unfamiliarity or lack of information (Poyrazli, and Grahame, 2007). Finally, international students must navigate administrative challenges such as immigration regulations, securing housing, and understanding financial obligations, which add to the complexity of their experience. The need to quickly adapt to and learn about unfamiliar systems can be both demanding and time-consuming (Andrade, 2006).

3. Research Methodology

Research methodology is the systematic framework and set of procedures employed to collect, analyze, and interpret data to address specific research questions or objectives (Creswell, 2024). Qualitative research is an exploratory research method focused on understanding the underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations behind human behavior and experiences (Verma, et al., 2024; Ang, 2024). It involves collecting non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations, and textual analysis, to gain in-depth insights into the subject matter and identify patterns and themes (Shen, and Smith, 2024). Thus, the study adopted a qualitative research

methodology. This research collected qualitative data using the open-ended questionnaire research design, which included delivering questionnaires over the mail as a kind of remote contact, instead of conducting in-person group talks. This enhanced the capacity of all participants to provide individual solutions. The questionnaire was sent to all international students at the Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa, using the total population as the sampling technique. The questionnaire was sent to 60 international students, and only 36 of the students responded to the questionnaire. The gathered data was then analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative data analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within the data (Mirza, et al., 2024). It involves coding the data, grouping similar codes into broader themes, and interpreting these themes to understand the underlying meanings and insights relevant to the research questions (Braun, and Clarke, 2024).

4. Research Findings and Discussions

Theme 1: Country background of the participants

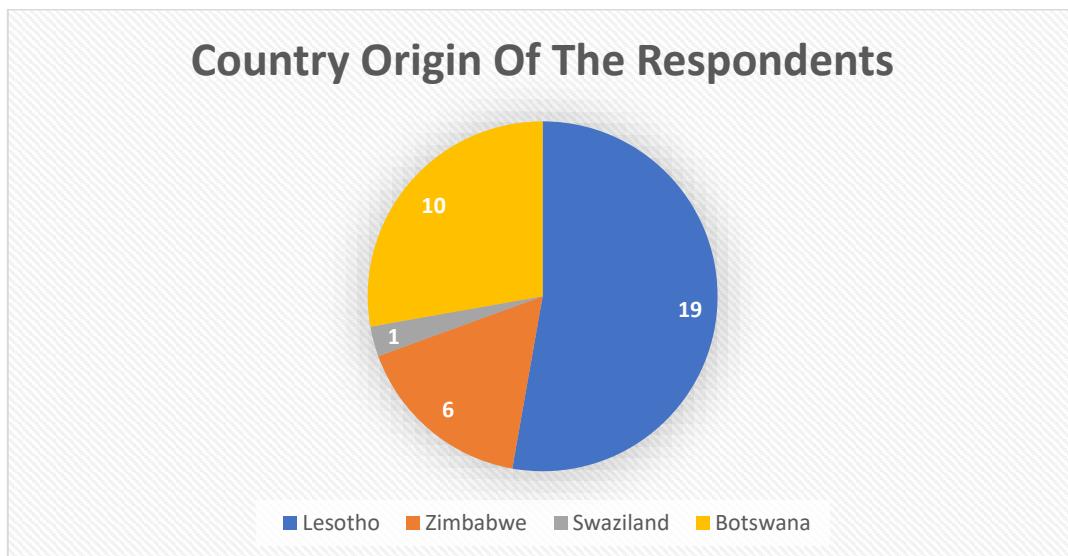


Figure 1: Country background of the participants

As illustrated in Figure 1, the research participants consisted of a heterogeneous cohort of international students originating from Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Eswatini(Eswatini), and Botswana, each contributing distinct cultural and educational experiences. Lesotho had the highest number of respondents, with 19 students, followed by Botswana with 10 respondents. Zimbabwe is represented by 6 respondents, while Swaziland has the least number of respondents with only 1. This suggests that most international students in this dataset come from Lesotho and Botswana, indicating a strong presence from these neighboring countries in the survey. The representation from Swaziland is significantly smaller compared to the other countries.

Theme 2: Communication obstacles encountered during pre-registration and post-registration at the university

The data on communication obstacles encountered during pre-registration and post-registration at the university reveals several significant issues faced by students. A recurring theme is the inefficiency of the university's systems and administrative processes concerning communication with the students and providing answers to the submitted queries. Students reported frequent errors with the registration system, making it difficult to submit necessary documents on time. One student highlighted the impact of visa renewal delays, and mentioning that "I could not submit all the required documents before registration because renewing my study visa took longer than I expected." Additionally, changes in fees and administrative requirements each year, particularly for postgraduate students, caused confusion and frustration. For example, one student noted, "It still doesn't make sense why the finance office includes early fees, yet they know Masters and PhD students pay fees once during their residency period if study received university postgrad funding."

Moreover, communication from the university administration often lacked timeliness and clarity, exacerbating these issues. Students expressed frustration with the delayed responses from finance officers and other departments, which hindered their ability to complete registration processes efficiently. A student mentioned, "We were told to send our documents, but it takes ages for them to give us feedback," highlighting the slow feedback loop. Additionally, network challenges and data shortages were mentioned as barriers to completing

online registration. Some students faced difficulties in understanding administrative procedures, even when language was not a barrier, due to the lack of clear guidance. The negative environment in the international office was another significant concern, with one student describing the atmosphere as draining due to "negative energy," and alleging favoritism and inconsistent assistance. These varied experiences underline the need for improved communication strategies, more responsive administrative support, and a more supportive and professional environment within the university's international office.

Language barriers are another significant challenge, especially for students from non-native English-speaking backgrounds. One student from Eswatini mentioned, "It could be the language barrier since I'm from Eswatini I'm only familiar with Siswati and English, I understand a bit of Zulu since it's similar to one of my home languages." This highlights the struggle of adapting to lectures and social interactions in a multilingual environment. Social anxiety and homesickness were also cited as personal obstacles, affecting students' ability to integrate and feel comfortable in their new surroundings.

To substantiate these findings, several studies have emphasized the presence of communication problems at institutions of higher education. One major issue is the difficulty in understanding the complex terminology and procedural instructions often provided in English or the local language, which can lead to confusion and delays in completing necessary paperwork (Andrade, 2006). Additionally, international students may struggle with accessing support services due to unclear or insufficient information about whom to contact for assistance, resulting in prolonged registration processes and missed deadlines (Kuo, 2011). Moreover, cultural differences in communication styles can lead to misunderstandings between students and university staff, further complicating interactions and creating barriers to effective communication during critical registration phases (Spencer-Oatey, and Xiong, 2006).

Theme 3: Financial difficulties encountered at university

The analysis of financial difficulties encountered by students at the university reveals several significant themes and challenges. A recurring issue is the lack of bursaries and scholarships for international students, which forces them to rely heavily on personal or family funds. As one student poignantly noted, "I do not have a bursary, so I have to pay for my medical aid, registration fee, and also pay for my studies. Apart from that, there is rent, food and cosmetics. To pay for all this my mother must apply for a loan, sometimes she doesn't qualify for it and sometimes she gets a small amount that does not cover what I've mentioned above. It is so frustrating, especially at the beginning of the year." This highlights the significant financial burden placed on students and their families, leading to considerable stress and frustration, particularly at the start of the academic year.

Additionally, the rising costs of medical aid and registration fees present substantial obstacles. Students reported that the annual increase in medical aid fees, coupled with compulsory registration fees, places an additional financial strain. For instance, one student stated, "Medical aid fees are so expensive, and the registration fee is to be paid the same time as medical aid it makes it difficult for students." Moreover, the limited availability of scholarships exacerbates these difficulties, forcing students to cover higher tuition costs out-of-pocket. Issues with financial communication from the university, such as late notifications about fees, further complicate the situation. Some students also mentioned specific financial challenges related to accommodation, food, and necessary academic equipment, underlining the multifaceted nature of their financial struggles. The analysis underscores the need for more robust financial support systems, timely communication regarding financial obligations, and expanded scholarship opportunities to alleviate these burdens.

To substantiate these findings, Zia, et al., (2024) opines that financial difficulties are a common challenge faced by international students at universities, significantly impacting their academic and personal lives. Additionally, they typically have limited access to scholarships, grants, or financial aid, exacerbating their financial strain (Beine, et al., 2014). Restrictions on work permits further limit their ability to earn money while studying, forcing many to rely solely on personal or family funds, which may not always be sufficient. This financial pressure can lead to stress and anxiety, affecting their academic performance and overall well-being (Chen, 2017). Moreover, the high cost of living in many university towns, including expenses for accommodation, food, and transportation, adds to their financial challenges (Zia, et al., 2024). Consequently, some international students may have to make difficult choices, such as cutting back on essential needs or reducing their academic workload to take up part-time jobs, thereby impacting their educational experience and success (Smith, and Khawaja, 2011).

Theme 4: Environmental challenges

The analysis of challenges related to the university's surroundings and atmosphere highlights several key issues faced by students as they adapt to their new environment. One prominent theme is the difficulty in navigating the campus, particularly for new students or those who registered late. A student noted, "It was not easy to find lecture rooms around campus," underscoring the disorientation experienced in a new and large campus setting. This issue is compounded by the lack of maps or guides, as mentioned by another student, "Not having a map on certain buildings to navigate where classes are." Additionally, logistical problems such as inadequate transport from downtown and malfunctioning library plugs add to the daily hassles students face". Furthermore, the physical environment of the campus presents issues such as the poor condition of cafeteria toilets, which a student described as "appalling," reflecting the need for improved facilities. Overall, these responses indicate a blend of logistical, and personal adaptation challenges that need to be addressed to enhance the university experience for all students.

Many international students struggle to find affordable housing close to campus, leading to longer commutes and increased transportation costs, which can be both time-consuming and stressful (Smith, and Khawaja, 2011). Additionally, international students may face difficulties with inadequate facilities, such as outdated libraries, crowded study spaces, and limited access to technology, which can hinder their academic performance (Forbes-Mewett, and Nyland, 2013). Another significant challenge is the lack of cultural and dietary accommodations in university dining facilities, which can affect students' health and comfort. Students from diverse cultural backgrounds may find it challenging to adjust to unfamiliar food options, potentially impacting their nutritional well-being (Brown, and Edwards, 2011). Lastly, international students often face difficulties in navigating unfamiliar urban environments, such as understanding public transportation systems or finding suitable accommodation, which can add to their stress and anxiety (Forbes-Mewett, and Nyland, 2013).

Theme 5: Accessibility challenges to university resources

The analysis of the data on challenges related to the accessibility of university resources reveals a few key issues with most students reporting no difficulties. A notable concern is the lack of alternative power sources during load shedding, which forces students to leave study premises like the library and student support centres. One student specifically mentioned, "Lack of alternative power sources at university. Being escorted out of university study premises (student support and library) during load shedding." This highlights the disruption of academic activities due to power outages, underscoring the need for the university to invest in backup power solutions to ensure continuous access to critical resources.

Another significant challenge pertains to delays and issues in accessing essential academic resources. For instance, a student reported difficulty in obtaining necessary materials for practical, stating, "The university does not give us resources on time, especially for practical's." Additionally, problems with digital resources were highlighted, such as being unable to download books from the e-library and issues with accessing the university portal due to not having a South African Identity number. These issues point to gaps in the digital infrastructure and resource management at the university. Moreover, the need for better communication and accessibility of career information was noted, suggesting a lack of visibility and availability of career services. Overall, while many students reported no issues, these highlighted problems indicate areas where the university can improve resource accessibility and support to enhance the academic experience.

Moreover, unfamiliarity with the university's systems and technology, such as online portals for course registration, resource access, and communication platforms, can lead to confusion and delays in obtaining essential information (Sawir, et al., 2012). Another critical challenge is the lack of cultural competence and sensitivity among university staff, which can result in international students feeling misunderstood or overlooked when seeking assistance, thus discouraging them from utilizing available resources (Andrade, 2006). Additionally, differences in educational practices and expectations can create misunderstandings about how to access academic support, such as tutoring services or writing centers, which may be structured differently from those in their home countries (Smith, and Khawaja, 2011).

Theme 6: Administrative obstacles encountered at the university

The analysis of administrative obstacles encountered by students at the university reveals a mix of positive and negative experiences. A significant number of students reported no administrative obstacles, praising the support provided by the international office. For instance, one student mentioned, "The International Office is very helpful, and I have nothing but good things to say." However, several students highlighted specific issues that impeded their academic progress. One notable problem was the delay in unblocking students for

registration and the late release of the list of continuing postgraduate students cleared for registration. A student expressed frustration, saying, "The list of continuing postgraduates cleared for registration is out late and with some students not on the list. This is inconvenient."

Additionally, some postgraduate students reported dissatisfaction with their study supervisors, mentioning delays in fulfilling the requirements necessary for their eligibility to register and graduate. One student noted, "For postgraduates, study supervisors sleep on their job. Delay in fulfilling the requirements of Exam office-submission of progress reports and other documents required for our eligibility to register and graduate." There were also issues with the finance office, such as delays in accessing I Enabler due to pending sponsorship approvals and slow responses to email inquiries. Another student highlighted a significant administrative error that impacted their academic journey, stating, "The issue of taking off and putting again my results cost me +3 years trying to fix them but never happened only until last semester." These responses indicate areas where the university's administrative processes can be improved to ensure timely and effective support for all students.

Firstly, universities lack administrative competencies in addressing international students' administrative needs (Arthur, 2017). Another obstacle is dealing with unfamiliar academic regulations and administrative procedures, such as course registration, credit transfers, and meeting graduation requirements, which may differ significantly from those in their home countries (Beine, Noël, and Ragot, 2014). Additionally, international students may face challenges in accessing academic support services, such as counseling and career advice, due to a lack of awareness or understanding of how to navigate these services effectively (Choudaha, and Schulmann, 2014). This situation can lead to missed opportunities for academic and professional development. Furthermore, inadequate cultural competence among university staff can result in misunderstandings or inadequate support for international students, as administrative procedures may not be tailored to address their specific needs and cultural differences (Glass et al., 2015).

5. Conclusion

The research reveals that international students encounter a diverse range of problems that have a substantial influence on their academic achievement and personal welfare. The main problems faced by international students in a new educational setting mostly revolve around language limitations, cultural differences, financial limits, and administrative impediments. Each of these factors significantly influences the entire experience of international students. Language problems impede efficient communication, resulting in academic challenges and social seclusion (Andrade, 2006). Cultural disparities often lead to sensations of estrangement and culture shock, hence exacerbating students' capacity to acclimatize and assimilate (Ward, et al., 2001). The presence of elevated tuition rates and restricted availability of financial assistance intensifies financial limitations, leading to increased stress and perhaps impeding academic achievement (Chen, 2017). Overcoming administrative obstacles, such as dealing with intricate immigration procedures and new educational structures, may be challenging without adequate assistance (Arthur, 2017). The study recommends that South African tertiary institutions should provide enhanced support services, such as cultural orientation programs and counseling, to help international students adjust to the academic and social environment. Additionally, study recommends creating of streamlined administrative processes for visas and academic registration to reduce bureaucratic challenges faced by international students. Future research could explore strategies for overcoming the identified obstacles faced by South African international students, comparative studies across different countries, or the impact of institutional support services on student success and well-being.

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