The Effects of COVID-19 on International Students in South Africa

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The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has put the entire world in a state of abrupt confusion and panic. This has affected different sectors in various walks of life: inclusive of education. People tend to continuously live in fear while seeking support from their governments. Conversely, governments and institutions of learning attempt to combat the pandemic by employing different strategies in order to help their citizens, however, foreign nationals in different countries seem to be left-out. Hence, this paper was targeted at examining the lived experiences of international students in developing nations during the COVID-19 pandemic. A review method was adopted for the study. Hence, relevant literature was reviewed. The findings of the study show that developing nations like the world have been badly hit by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, and the effect tends to be more severe for international students as focus was more on the citizens than foreign nationals. Also, the increasing rate of the pandemic affected the operation of higher education institutions through the imposed closure of university residences which exposed many international students to undue hardship. The study therefore recommends that there is an urgent need for the institutions of higher learning in developing nations to rethink their policy on internalisation towards a better welfare structure for international students.

Key words: *Coronavirus, COVID-19 Pandemic, Developing Nations, International Students, Internationalisation, Universities.*

Introduction

The outbreak of Coronavirus, commonly described as COVID-19 following the time of its appearance, could be traced to the China's Province of Wuhan in December 2019. The virus

continued to rapidly escalate in the Peoples' Republic of China and to other nations of the world: developed, developing and underdeveloped alike. According to Ozili (2020), the rapid spread of the virus was as a result of the movement of people especially through the air and land transportation in early 2020. Ducharme (2020) opines that by the time the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020, the virus had already spread to different developing countries of the world which are predominantly Africa. This led the governments of many of such nations to swing into action seeking ways of preventing the virus from spreading to unaffected places in the country. Other nations which were yet to record their first case sought for means of preventing the virus from getting into the country. However, all efforts seemed abortive as all developing nations registered their first few cases which later escalated into hundreds and thousands. This led to the announcement of a national state of disaster in many of these nations, thereby, leading to a shutdown of institutions and activities. For instance, in South Africa, a national state of disaster was announced on the 15th of March 2020 to further curb the spread of the virus (du Troit, 2020). Similarly, many developing nations followed suit in a bid to fight the pandemic. In this regard, many new policies were designed, while old ones were adjusted to fit the situation in which nations of the world found themselves. Suffice to state that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has occasioned the abrupt design and adjustment of various policies in developing nations. Meanwhile, in the midst of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of many nations remained on their citizens. Different nations sort for ways of assisting their citizens abroad to return to the country where they could be given due attention and support. However, little or no attention was given to foreign nationals in different countries.

Conversely, the education system like other sectors of different nations has been adversely affected. For instance, institutions of learning were shut regardless of the level. In other words, higher institutions of learning, secondary schools, amongst others were closed for a period of months, though some resumed activities after few weeks following online platforms. However, amidst the crises and shutting down of institutions of learning, international students seemed to have been neglected or treated the same way as citizens. This is with respect to issues revolving around their welfare. The neglect tends to have affected international students adversely. Hence, this study seeks to explore the complexities of being international students studying in developing nations during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an attempt to achieve the aim of the study, various relevant literature, inclusive of policy documents, was reviewed in order to explore the challenges and complexities of international students during the identified period.

Operational Definition of Terms

Developing African nations: Several minerals and potentials lie in different nations in the African continent, however, they are still considered developing (Essoungou, 2011; Negussie, 2018). The reason for such consideration is due to the levels of experienced development in

different nations of the continent. Meanwhile, according to Coulibaly (2020), African nations are described as being developing countries because of their struggling economies. Coulibaly (2020) however adds that the experience of poor economies in the African continent is traceable to colonisation. Morwa (2017) opines that the African continent can be categorised as developing because it is majorly characterised by a high rate of unemployment and acute poverty, amongst others. According to Morwa (2017) the developing nature of many African nations in the African continent can be attributed to structural policy slippages, poor governance, weak institutions, and rapid population growth, amongst others. Following the predominance of developing nations in Africa, the continent is easily considered as third world (Augustine, 2018). In this study, developing African nations is used to represent all nations in the continent.

Internationalisation: This is viewed as a significant driver of change in higher education (Rensburg, Motala & David, 2015). A review of the works of Cross, Mhlanga & Ojo (2009) as well as Rensburg, Motala & David (2015) shows that internationalisation can be used to mean having foreign practices being imbibed in the culture and activities of a given institution of learning in an attempt to ensure globalisation and achieve some forms of desired development. Meanwhile, Botha (2010) considers internalisation from an African point of view. According to Botha (2010), internationalisation is synonymous to Africanisation. Review of the work of Cross & Rouhani (2004) presents internationalisation as giving space to accommodate people from foreign nations. Such persons from foreign nations include students and staff members. The identified reviews on internationalisation further suggest that internationalisation can be done through research, teaching and learning, and exchange programmes, amongst others. In this study, internationalisation is used to mean the practice of opening the borders of a country for foreign nationals to come to study in order to further enhance globalisation.

Method

The research approach adopted for this study is a literature review method. The study focused on reviewing the complexities experienced by international students in developing nations in the African continent during the time of Covid-19 pandemic. The adoption of the literature review method is in congruence with Vieira (2015) & Snyder (2019) who posits that a literature review method in research especially as it concerns the social sciences gives researchers the opportunity to critically evaluate the opinion of other scholars on a given subject matter of focus. A review of the works of Vieira (2015) & Snyder (2019) shows that the literature review method is adaptable in all disciplines. Following the adopted method, relevant literature was reviewed in order to trace the complexities experienced by international students studying in developing nations in the African continent.

Results

Table 1 below shows the results of the findings following the literature review.

Table 1: Results of Reviewed Relevant Literature

Area covered	Search Item(s)	Study
Conceptualisation of Terms	Developing African nations	Essoungou (2011), Morwa (2017), Augustine (2018), Negussie (2018), and Coulibaly (2020)
	Internationalisation	Cross & Rouhani (2004), Cross, Mhlanga & Ojo (2009), Botha (2010), and Rensburg, Motala & David (2015).
Policy and Internationalisation of Higher Education	The Policy of Internationalisation of Higher Education	Kishun (2007), McLellan (2010), Botha (2010), Sehoole & Knight (2013), Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2017), and Uleanya & Yu (2019).
Research Methodology	Research method for review	Vieira (2015) and Snyder (2019).

Discussion of Findings

Following the literature review some emerging themes are discussed below.

The Policy of Internationalisation of Higher Education

Review of the work of Botha (2010) shows that it is a common standard and practice for higher education in different nations in the African continent to internationalise their higher education. According to Botha (2010), there is a connection between the practice of internationalisation of higher education in different African nations and Africanisation of such higher education systems. Meanwhile, Africanisation is used to connote the designing of a higher education system which inculcates African beliefs, norms, cultures and practices in the forms of formal education provided for the citizens (Uleanya & Yu, 2019). According to, Sehoole & Knight (2013) the act of internationalising higher education systems in Africa makes it possible for the attainment of the desired developments in nations within the continent.

Sehoole & Knight (2013) further posit that internationalisation of higher education systems in the African continent will help aid the achievement of the stated Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which in turn will ensure the strengthening of Africa's development. The identified goals by Sehoole & Knight (2013) include the following:

- eradication of poverty and hunger; attainment of universal primary education,
- promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women,
- reduction of child mortality,
- improvement of maternal health,
- combatting HIV/AIDS, malaria as well as other diseases, and
- ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership to contribute to development.

Conversely, a review of extant literatures shows that internationalisation as well as attempt to achieve the millennium goals through the roles of higher education is predicated on designed and implemented policies which act as guide (Kishun, 2007 & McLellan, 2010). According to the findings following the review of the work of Kishun (2007), it can be deduced that some developing nations in Africa have robust policies on the internalisation of higher education. However, McLellan (2010) opines that policy of internationalisation of higher education is a subject matter which has failed to be significantly recognised in some of the nations in the African continent. For instance, according to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2017), the presence of international students in South Africa, which is one of the developing nations in the continent, and its higher institutions indicates the need for clear national and institutional policies. Thus, international students across South African higher education institutions and by extension many other nations in the continent are to be catered for following national and institutional policies, processes and services (DHET, 2017). However, according to Cross, Mhlanga & Ojo (2009), what is expected to make up internationalisation policies in different institutions of higher learning is yet unknown.

Furthermore, a review of the policy framework for internationalisation of higher education in South Africa by the Department of Higher Education (DHET) (2017) shows that internationalisation of higher education helps to equip African students and staff members of higher education institutions with the desired knowledge, skills as well as attitudes, needed to contribute to and promote and develop the nation socio-economically. Thus, policies of internationalisation are to be designed to make available provision for certain criteria which are envisaged to attract talented and highly qualified people to higher institutions of learning in different nations on the continent. This is expected to be done in a bid of enhancing human capital of different nations and the continent at large. Further findings deduced following the review of the policy framework for internationalisation of higher education in South Africa by the Department of Higher Education (DHET) (2017) suggests that governments and

Departments of Higher Education in the continent are to ensure the creation of conducive environments which promotes internationalisation of higher education. The creation of a conducive environment is envisaged to make internationalisation flourish and the desired goals and objectives being achieved. This is expected to be done through the assigning of certain specific responsibilities to different offices and persons. For instance, higher education institutions are to be saddled with the responsibilities of establishing and maintaining appropriate support services which will encourage students; either incoming or outgoing. Other areas of supports identified by the policy framework includes: the applications for study visas as well as on-campus administrative issues; advice and assistance regarding registration process; support with residence matters; academic support; and counselling. However, the issue remains how many international students are duly assisted following the provision of the stated policy.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic brought in dynamic challenges following its suddenness. This seems to have led to the creation of new adjustment policies to various units of different higher institutions in different parts of the world, South Africa inclusive. Suffice to state that the issue of internationalisation was adversely hampered during the pandemic, thereby affecting international students in various ways. Thus, the need for this study which seeks to investigate the complexities of being an international student in South Africa during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in order to be able to proffer suggestions on how internationalisation policies can be designed, upheld and implemented in different institutions of higher education. This could also help different institutions of higher education in South Africa to design systematic and unique models capable of enhancing internationalisation for the desired developments to be enjoyed. However, in the context of this study, emphasis is placed on the issues revolving around welfare services for international students during pandemics, especially such as COVID-19.

COVID-19's Effects on the International Students in South Africa

The way international students in the present crisis are treated may determine whether South Africa will be able to retain its prominent position as a preferred educational destination, and whether it will be a driver for PhD capacity development in Africa (Hagenmeier, 2020:np). Meanwhile, The Republic of South Africa has positioned itself as a leader when it comes to the internationalisation of higher education in Africa. Institutions of higher learning in the country have been experiencing a surge in the enrolment of international students since the country returned to the democratic system of government in 1994. South Africa currently has twenty-six (26) public universities (USAF, 2017) which are scattered across its nine (9) provinces (see Table 2).

Table 2: South African Universities per Province

S/no.	Province	No. of public Universities	Name of the Universities
1	Eastern Cape	5	University of Fort Hare Nelson Mandela University Rhodes University Walter Sisulu University Central University of Technology
2.	Free State	1	University of the Free State
3.	Gauteng	7	University of Johannesburg University of South Africa University of the Witwatersrand University of Pretoria Tshwane University of Technology Vaal University of Technology Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University
4.	KwaZulu Natal	4	University of Kwazulu Natal University of Zululand Durban University of Technology Mangosuthu University of Technology
5.	Limpopo	2	University of Limpopo University of Venda
6.	Mpumalanga	1	University of Mpumalanga
7.	North West	1	North West University
8.	Northern Cape	1	Sol Plaatje University
9.	Western Cape	4.	Cape Peninsula University of Technology University of Cape Town University of the Western Cape Stellenbosch University

Source: Researchers' baseline study

Each of these universities hosts a significant number of international students, the majority of whom are from the nations in Africa. Several reasons accounts for the choice of South Africa as a preferred destination of study for many international students from African countries. These factors, according to Mpinganjira (2012), as well as Calitz, Cullen & Jooste (2020) include: affordable tuition; exchange rate of the South African currency to other currencies in Africa; availability of scholarship opportunities; and proximity to home country, among others. While these could be seen as the pull factors, there are many other indices that contribute to the success of international students in their academic pursuits abroad. Such

indices include: suitable accommodation; adequate access to healthcare; level of home students and staff's acceptance; and the institution's policy on internationalisation. Following the review of the works of Hardman (2020), International Association of Universities (2020), Maslen (2020) as well as Schleicher (2020), COVID-19 pandemic has been considered to have a significant effect on all students of institutions of higher learning globally. Meanwhile, its effects on the international students are more severe. In South Africa for instance, the majority of international students who are from African countries could not travel home due to the imposed lockdown and closure of international borders by the SA government, a measure introduced to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, a number students became stranded and faced a series of challenges. The severity of COVID-19 experience among the international students could be captured well in the voice of Hayyu Imanda, an Indonesian student who was on short visit to South Africa during the pandemic, "I was by myself, in a foreign country with no-one I knew, in the middle of a pandemic" (Imanda, 2020).

The review of literature and other available published materials revealed the following as challenges faced by the international students in South Africa during the outbreak of COVID-19:

i. Accommodation: The announcement of the national state of disaster by the South African government led to the closure of educational campuses (schools, colleges, and universities) and consequently the closure of residences. The sudden closure of university residences subjected many international students to undue hardships (Haniff, 2020) due to the inability of some SA universities to provide alternative accommodation arrangements for these students. The majority of the international students became homeless and were forced to seek refuge from friends and strangers that could offer assistance. Some international students who could not secure any form of accommodation assistance "had to arrange to travel home at short notice and at a cost not budgeted for" (Chasi, 2020).

ii. Food: Global food supplies became threatened at the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The imposed lockdown rules applied to contain the spread of the coronavirus worldwide affected food production and loss of income to many farmers causing inflation to the price of food and agricultural products worldwide (World Bank, 2020). The imposed lockdown created a financial crisis for many people, especially those in the informal sectors. While government of different countries responded by introducing various relief programmes to cushion the effect of COVID-19 on their citizenry, the relief measures could not cover all as they were targeted mainly at the citizens. In South Africa for instance, the government launched a "USD26 billion coronavirus rescue package to cushion the effect of the pandemic on struggling households" (Oliver, 2020). However, the

international students in the country were not targeted in the relief package of the government.

iii.   Health: COVID-19 was basically a public health issues and many international students in South Africa were exposed to health-related challenges during the lockdown. While it is compulsory for all international students to have medical insurance which covers the duration of their studies in South Africa, the restriction of movement during the lockdown prevented many of the students from visiting doctors which put a strain on their health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

This study explored the effects of COVID-19 on international students in South Africa. A review method was adopted for the study. Hence, relevant literature was reviewed and their findings adapted in order to trace the possible effects of COVID-19 on international students studying in South Africa. The findings of the review of relevant literature showed that South Africa is home for many students from across different parts of the world, especially African nations. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an adverse effect on various nations inclusive of South Africa and the operation of higher education institutions. Meanwhile, the imposed closure of university residences tends to have exposed many international students to undue hardship. This has hindered them from focusing on their academics. Sequel to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- There is an urgent need for the institutions of higher learning in developing nations such as South Africa to rethink their policy on internalisation towards a better welfare structure for international students, especially during outbreaks of pandemics. This will help to ensure the safety of international students, as well as continuity of their academic pursuits.
- International students should also be considered as important as indigenous students where outbreaks such as COVID-19 are experienced. This will help in giving such students the sense of belonging and encourage many others to consider the nation as one of their best options for furthering their education. Moreover, such can also help to attract foreign investors, especially those who may be interested in investing in the education system of the nation.
- Collaborations with international partners should be sort by the government and institutions of higher learning in order to help ease the burdens of international students studying in foreign countries such as South Africa.

Limitation of the study

The study which considers the complexities of international students in developing nations in the time of COVID-19 pandemic was limited to review of relevant literature, as no empirical data was collected or analysed. Hence, it is suggested that similar studies be replicated empirically. In this regard, quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods can be adopted for such a study. It is also suggested that similar studies can be replicated comparing the complexities of international students during the time of COVID-19 in nations within the African continent as well as others.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This paper has momentous policy implications for the internationalisation of higher education policy in South Africa. The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the incapacity of SA universities in taking care of international students during emergencies. Stakeholders in the higher education sector in South Africa must understand the unique place that international students occupy when talking about the internationalisation of higher education globally. Government and policy makers in education must rethink the welfare services for international students, especially during the time of emergencies like COVID-19, so as to ensure adequate and inclusive treatment of international students. Since South African higher education institutions cater for growing numbers of international students, particularly at postgraduate level (DHET, 2017). The success of these students while studying requires painstaking efforts towards providing safety, security and decent welfare services for them.

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