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African Higher Education in the Age of Internationalization: The Case for International Double and Joint Degree Programs as an Impetus for Student Mobility

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ABSTRACT

In the last three decades, there has been a rush towards internationalizing higher education. The international double/joint degree programs are one of the drivers of internationalisation activities. Many African universities have evolved to offer their students these opportunities for academic mobility. This study is a phenomenological understanding of the experiences of African students in Canada on exchange partnerships for international double/joint degree programs (IDDP), using Bourdieu's toolbox. The result shows a gap between the ideal expectations and the instrumental aspects of the programs. Students seem satisfied, despite the challenges faced by participating in these programs.

Keywords: Internationalization, international double degree programs, student mobility, African higher education

INTRODUCTION

When the Institute of International Education (2011) published its first survey on the international double degree or joint degree programs, there was no mention of any university in Africa offering such opportunities to its students. Since then, many African universities have entered partnerships with universities beyond the continent to offer these learning opportunities as a symbolic aspect to their progress on internationalising higher education.

Considered as 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education' (Knight, 2008), the internationalization of higher education has risen to become one of the dominant frameworks for the development of scholarship production, dissemination, and pedagogy. Many progressive scholars have lamented the prevalence of neoliberal motivations as unsustainable for humanistic progress and therefore, impeding the foundational tenet of educational institutions (Tarc, 2013). To pursue the foundational tenets, including the pursuit of the communal public good, internationalization activities provide venues and hopes for nurturing the ideals of cosmopolitan understandings (Tarc, 2013). Henceforth, the contemplation of a world that seeks to promote humanistic values turns internationalization into a target worth pursuing.

Knight (2004) contends that internationalization strategies encompass a range of academic activities that are inclusive of, but not limited to student mobility through study-abroad or exchange programs, academic collaborations such as the International Double Degree Programs (IDDPs), off-shore campus and curricular reforms. As a strategy for internationalizing higher education, international double degree programs (IDDPs) are one of the components of study-abroad and exchange programs. Thus, the international double degree programs result from international partnerships between two or more universities located in different countries whereby participating students attend both institutions to obtain half of their program requirements in each university (Knight & Lee, 2012; Kuder & Obst, 2009). This course of study yields two degrees, one from each participating university. The international double degree programs were popularized by the European Union through the Erasmus initiative and have therefore been one of the successful drivers of educational partnerships between universities in the European Higher Education Area and around the world.

However, African universities have trailed the Global North in providing their students with opportunities to participate in this international academic endeavor, within the continent and also beyond. Furthermore, scholarly literature reflecting on African student experiences in these curricular initiatives is scarce.

In this study, I delve into the issue of access to international double degree programs between African and Canadian institutions of higher learning to highlight some of the trends that prevail in student mobility initiatives but have received less attention of researchers and practitioners of international education.

In framing the main research questions, I want to know the standing of African universities in the evolving trend of international double and joint degree programs with the Global North. How do these universities provide students with access to such academic programs that are vital in the age of internationalization of higher education? What are the experiences of students embracing these programs? How do learning conditions and opportunities for self-improvement in

sub-Saharan countries impact outbound mobility rates? What are the student mobility challenges such as the brain-drain for African institutions, with a special focus on Canada?

This study results from partnership document analysis and the extensive phenomenological data drawn from interviews with five students, as well as two international education agents' views at two Canadian universities. I therefore, I examine these interviews using Bourdieusian lenses to illuminate the experiences of students attending university in Canada on exchange partnerships with African universities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The internationalisation of higher education is a complex phenomenon. As a result, every attempt to define the concept should be considered evolving. As time passes, scholars provide more routes for understanding the concept. For example, Knight (1997) surveyed some stakeholders to reflect their understanding of the rationales for inserting international dimensions in higher education. The responses were varied as internationalisation implied, "international education standards, preparation of globally knowledgeable and intercultural competent graduates, recruiting and supporting international student' teaching of foreign languages, curriculum reform, marketing and export of education products and services, study abroad and work placement for Canadian students."(Knight, 1997, p.5)

Stier (2004) contends that the complexity of conceptualising internationalisation stemmed from university administrators driving activities or initiatives that do not often converge in words and understandings. To reduce these misunderstandings, Stier (2004) proposed his theory of internationalisation ideologies: idealism, instrumentalism, and educationalism. Other proponents have proposed their conceptualisations of internationalization (Byram, 2018; Enders, 2004; Gacel-Avila, 2005; Svenson & Wihlborg, 2010; Yemini, 2015). However, Byram's (2018) conceptualization of internationalism as normative goal driving internationalization activities encapsulates the hopes and expectations of stakeholders, focussing on cultural exchanges and humanitarian values. Internationalism is therefore normative, giving directions that guide internationalization activities on both fronts: administrative and pedagogical.

The administrative front delves into rules and practices regarding exchange and cooperation between societies and the understanding that we live in an interdependent world that requires collaboration in confronting old and new challenges. On the pedagogical front, the focus is on teachings strategies that override colonial mindsets that might permeate university partnership agreements which provide for academic activities such as scholar and student exchange programs.

Beyond internationalisation as a conceptual framework, I rely on Bourdieu's theory of structural reproductions to analyze the experiences of African students studying in Canada on exchange programs to comprehend the challenges and prospects for such academic mobility activities. There are several scholars that have attempted to reflect on issues of human migrations and mobility initiatives using Bourdieu's theoretical toolboxes (Borjesson, 2017; Joy et al., 2018; Reed-Danahay, 2019). Others have applied Bourdieu's theory of habitus to examine the imbalance and asymmetry for successful academic experiences amongst students. In this research, I argue that the concepts of capital, habitus, and space (Bourdieu, 1989, 2018) have the potential for opening the wells of knowledge pertaining to understanding the details of African student mobility experiences in the Global North, which then can lead to reforming policy and praxis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scarcity of research examining the experiences of African students on exchange programs in Canada is so evident that a simple search online fails to yield relevant information. This is in contrast with the growing interest studying in Canada has become to African students as revealed in the 2018 edition of QS Applicant Survey. In fact, this survey has shown that Canada has toppled the Great Britain and the United States as top destinations for African students contemplating tertiary education outside the continent. When considering the theory for outbound student mobility that lists the constrained-domestic schooling and the migration for employment that characterize sub-Saharan higher education and given the kaleidoscopic demographic explosion and rates of successful completion of secondary education, Africans will continue to be most likely to leave the continent for tertiary education. According to Kritz (2013); "5.8 per cent of enrolled tertiary education students go outside their homelands for study", a number so high when compared with the rest of the world that stands at only 2 percent.

Therefore, there is a need for African universities to embrace innovative programs such as the international double or joint degree programs. However, Knight (2014) warns that these programs present many challenges:

> Different regulatory systems, academic calendars, quality assurance and accreditation schemes, credit systems, tuition and scholarship programmes, teaching approaches, entrance and examination requirements, language of instruction and thesis or dissertation supervision are a few of the issues that collaborating institutions have to address (Knight, 2014, p.1).

Furthermore, the prevalence of neoliberal doctrine in internationalisation activities has given rise to the practice of luring the best and bright youths of the

Global South as revenue sources for financially strapped institutions of higher learning in the Global North (Kritz, 2006). These young people are later solicited for citizenship after graduation because of their readiness for joining the workforce. Consequently, Kritz (2006) contends:

> In today's Globalisation Era, knowledge is increasingly a commodity that moves between countries. The growth of the knowledge-based economy has led not only to competition among employers worldwide for the best brains but also among the institutions that train the best brains. (p. 4)

The issue of brain-drain is critical to developing nations. Global North nations are fully aware of the dramatic consequences of luring and depriving the Global South with their very hopes for striving to improve their living conditions. Equally, the Global South is stuggling to create conditions that would entice students to remain. This is why several African leaders are advocating for regional academic exchange within Africa to stem this trend (Zeleza, 2017). Accordingly, Knight (2012) affirms that there is a new trend in the development of internationalization of higher education in Africa. Many countries have been trying to establish regional institutional partnerships for students and scholar mobility. For instance, the SADC, the Southern African Development Community, has been pushing for policy initiatives to alleviate barriers for students and scholar mobility within this region. Many measures have been taken, including the easing of visa obligations, academic fees, and housing to promote the internationalisation across SADC region and Africa.

This regional internationalisation is critical to the development of academic collaborations and student mobility to respond to the local needs for better tertiary education (Dell, 2019; Knight & Sehoole, 2012). Knight and Sehoole (2012) contend that the development of regional initiatives such as the student exchange programs from the SADC region is a testament that sustains the merit and relevance of internationalisation in the Global South. Such regional partnerships are promising to propel academic cooperation amongst institutions of higher learning from the South. However, the issues of poverty and inadequate funding of higher education in some developing countries are threatening this prospect as many students from the SADC flock to the much better equipped universities in South Africa and the Global North.

METHOD

This study relies on hermeneutic phenomenological interviews with students from Africa and liaison agents at two Canadian universities who are involved in exchange programs. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach is used to

illuminate the lives of African students completing their study-abroad in Canada. According to Van Manen (1990), a hermeneutic phenomenological study involves unlimited rounds of interviews to the satisfaction of the researcher. Five students and two administrators or liaison agents participated in this study. Although my focus is on students' experiences, the other stakeholders that play critical roles in planning and executing these academic activities were approached to voice their observations for better understanding. Participants were solicited by emails I sent out to students involved in an international joint or double degree programs at the two universities. I used liaison agents at the International Offices to facilitate contacts as they had the records of targeted students. These emails included the consent form, interview questions, and ethics approval to conduct research. Five out of 18 potential participants accepted my solicitation. Two participants were undergraduate students, and the rest were pursuing graduate degrees. Furthermore, the two liaison agents also accepted to participate.

Two rounds of interviews were conducted. While three participants were interviewed in person, four were interviewed on skype. The first interviews lasted an hour each and dealt with questions relating to the participants' experiences with the overall process of their involvement in the study-abroad programs. Questions were asked, regarding before, during and after their involvement. The after-involvement stage was mostly speculative as none of the student-participants had finished their programs by the time they were interviewed. Three of these participants shared the excerpts of IDDP partnership contracts which detailed the requirements for the study trajectory. These partnership contracts were critical in building deeper questions to elaborate understanding of the process.

The second set of interviews were held one month after the first ones. They were meant to review the researchers' notes and analyses with participants who were made aware of their responsibility to authenticate their assertions. As for document and policy analyses, the researcher began by searching the university websites to locate relevant information before asking the liaison agents about policy and curricular documents. Data were themed for better understanding and four major themes emerged: access, funding, pedagogy, and adaptation.

RESULTS

As I alluded to in the methodological section, data collected are presented and analysed according to the plan I followed when interviewing participants. In that plan, I began by asking participants questions relating to prior joining on study-abroad, follow by during the experience, and ending with the after placement abroad.

The partnership agreements I saw details the courses that should be taken and the requirements for graduation at both partnering universities. Nothing was

mentioned about extra-curricular activities and guidance for immersive experiences in host communities.

The participant names are changed to preserve confidentiality. The term 'Africa' is used as a geographical descriptor, the specific countries are not mentioned.

Before-joining IDDPs/exchange programs

The before-joining stage seems marred with challenges for participants. Ben, one of the student-participants, explains:

> I didn't know about these exchange programs until I was finishing off my sophomore year at my university in Africa. One day, as I was coming out of a lecture, I bumped into a student who told me he was working on an IDDP with a university in Montreal. That was fascinating. I was so surprised there was such a program. Then I decided to get more info from the student, but it was so confusing as the person I was referred to did not know what I was talking about.

This leads to question how well institutions of higher learning disseminate information about study abroad programs. Ben later revealed that looking for information to determine the existence of these exchange programs at his university was tricky as his university's website was not helpful either as it was not updated to reflect current development in curricular programming and internationalization activities.

As Ben continued searching for information, it turned out that the IDDP student he met was in fact connected to a relative who was a member of the academic administration that guided him through the process of getting his IDDP partnership contract signed by both universities. It took a full year to get his contract through the administrative pipeline. In Bourdieusian terms, Ben's experience fits the concept of capital. Bourdieu spoke of economic, social and cultural capitals as quintessentially critical to forging the habitus or the unconscious disposition individuals possess in positioning themselves within a society (1989). The person Ben met gained access to IDDP because of his connection to a relative who was a member of the university administration and was willing to orient him through the process. This is a privilege Ben did not have as he had to struggle through the administrative labyrinth to get access to this valuable program.

Ben wanted to join IDDP for international studies, He saw that as an opportunity to gain access for the prospects of a prosperous social and professional fulfilling life. He was willing to go through the process, no matter how long it seemed. He

fully understood such process will slow down his pace for graduation. When Ben managed to get his IDDP contract through the process, he was entering his third year at his home university but decided it was good he goes abroad to complete the requirements of his partnering university. He would then learn that the immigration administrative requirements are harsher than the enduring university process he had faced. Financing his study abroad was also a major hurdle as his IDDP contract was constraining in the sense that, once in Canada, he could only work on campus for limited hours. Furthermore, he had to pay higher school fees compared to what he usually paid at his home university in Africa. To successfully apply for his visa, the immigration officials required a huge financially guarantee that will determine his capacity to support himself through schooling without the recourse of working to pay for his needs in Montreal.

Another participant, Susan, described the process of obtaining the Canadian study permit as so invasive as to give the impression that she had to expose her confidential information to strangers. She contends that it was emotionally draining:

> I did not know the process was so excruciating. I live in a city that is far away from the capital city where the Canadian consulate or visa treatment centre is located. I had to fly three times to the capital city, first to fill out the application. The second time was to have my fingerprints taken as they would not allow me to have it done at local police services. And third time to get my passport once visa application was approved. To back up the application, I had to submit proof of financial self-sufficiency such as bank account records that shows how I managed to save the money I had. The details asked on the application forms left no room for privacy since I had to reveal all my biological family links. I had to list all my relatives' names, addresses, professions, and birthdays which I thought was pointless as these people had nothing to do with my intention to study abroad. I found this very uncomfortable.

The experience of this student is revealing in a sense that there has been reports of African students having difficulty meeting the conditions for obtaining Canadian study permits and visas. According to a recent report by the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, three out of four Africans applying for study permit and visa are rejected for distinct reasons (Toughill, 2019).

I suspect that this situation makes it difficult for many students to consider embarking on exchange programs with Canadian universities. For this student, it appears that while Canadian-African exchange programmes are in place, these have stringent criteria, often hard to meet.

According to a liaison agent at a Canadian university, her university has taken the measure to alleviate the burden of those international students who fail to obtain study visas:

> We have now the provision of a grace period for paying school fees. Once we issue an offer of admission, a student has 30 days to pay a quarter of their school fees as a good faith for holding their spot in the program. Those fees are not refundable in case the student decide to withdraw on their own, except in case they have been refused visa by the Canadian consulate. In this case, they would have to furnish proof of refusal by the Canadian consulate before refund is issued.

In any case, the Canadian ministry of immigration and citizenship which has the prerogative of issuing visas and study-permits acknowledges that African students' rate of visa refusal is higher than that of any other part of the world. They are most likely to see their visa applications turned down at the rate of two of ten (Toughill, 2019). The Bourdieusian concept of space and symbolic power is very much at play here (Bourdieu, 2018). The economic capital required from African students to meet the visa conditions are a major selective barrier that preclude many from attempting to venture in international exchange programs.

During the study abroad experiences

Joining a study-abroad experiment may be exciting but it requires understanding the intricacy of living in a foreign land, far away from own customs and social routines and requires adjustment. It is therefore incumbent upon individual to develop certain psycho-cognitive tools that would eventually ease the pain of strangeness on foreign lands.

When Neto arrives in Canada for his exchange experiment, he did not realise how difficult it would be until he arrives at the University in Montreal. From struggling to select classes and register to physically locating classrooms before attending lectures, Neto became overwhelmed:

> Everything was so computerized. There was nobody to sit with me and guide me through the process. On arrival at university, I was given a package with all the codes and steps to access my student account online where I could do all the registration process required. They told me how I could register, change, or drop courses without going to the registrar's office. Unfortunately, this was the first time for me to do such operations. I had to tell them that I come from a university where we have never done anything online, except paying the school fee at a bank.

The estrangement of Neto on campus demonstrates the need to support students and review welcoming procedures for international students. There is a need for understanding here that the one process fits all does not work well when dealing with diversity. Exchange students coming from the developed world such as France or Japan have differing needs from those from the Sub-Saharan countries. Here is a student who may not have used a computer for any other service but the search engine or access email accounts but suddenly had to be thrown into a complex world of high technology. As one can imagine for this student, arriving at the university in Montreal where every academic activity is computerized must have been stressful.

On this point, Marco, another exchange student from Sub-Saharan Africa, explains:

> I have an email account that I check occasionally back home. Since I came here, I realise I must check my email hundred times a day since most of my communications for academic activities are channeled to my email. It is now that I realise how indispensable this tool is for my academic life. I keep telling my fellow students and even my instructors to take it easy with me as I come from a city where even the basic thing like electricity and drinkable water are scarce. In my lectures, I see students taking notes on their laptops, they all have them. This was unthinkable for me before I got here.

Opinions like these may strike as strange but they demonstrate the precarity of education in certain parts of the world. This observation concurs to the need of pursuing internationalization activities as the catalyst for quality improvement among partnering institutions of higher learning. If Marco's home university continues to value international exchanges, especially with universities in the developed world, chances are they will be compelled to invest in improving the learning conditions at their universities so that they can provide venues for receiving other students and therefore not giving the impression that they are entering into these agreements only to become senders. Receiving students from their partnering institutions would eventually compel African universities to feel the urgency of finding resources that could allow them to rise to world class universities.

When asked what change he would like to see at his home university in Africa, Marco cites primarily the access to information. That includes online research and administrative activities. Rather than going to check the billboard outside their registrars or faculty departments, he would like to see that done on a computer in the comfort of his bedroom. He bemoans the level of

computer literacy skills of his peers on his home campus and dreams of going back there to lecture them of the progress he has made since arriving in Canada. He wonders why there should be such discrepancy between the two worlds. He likens his experience as 'like coming from the dark ages'.

The lack of high speed internet as well as the structural resources such as computer labs and critical software for research at Marco's home university is unparalleled. After listening to his elaboration of the plights of his learning experiences, one may wonder about the reluctance of some world-class universities to partner with institutions of higher learning in the Africa. As one liaison officer at a Canadian university recounted:

> We can partner with any university for short term exchanges or development/service-learning, but we are very selective on international double degree programs. In fact, we do not have joint degree partnerships which requires granting a single diploma with two partnering university seals because we are proud of our track records as a world class university and do not want to appear cautioning the reputation and quality assurance of the other partner. Right now, we have double degree partnerships with several universities in Africa, but not joint degrees.

One can see that the issue of quality assurance is a major obstacle for some African universities in their internationalization aspirations. This is also exacerbated by the prevalence of world ranking services that have consistently shown African universities lagging far behind and therefore demonstrating the lack of scientific rigours and resources. The world ranking services also play out the issues of poverty and lack of financial power to invest in higher education.

According to this Canadian liaison officer, her institution has received some students from partnering universities in Africa on international double degree partnerships, but no Canadian student has attempted to attend an African university on such program. Why this lack of interest from Canadian students? I suspect that the lack of interest stems from the assumptions of lack of academic rigour and quality assurance as often portrayed by the media and the world ranking services and reputation. Therefore, the value of having a IDDP from a Canadian university partnering with an African University is critical to leveraging the image of African higher education. Consequently, this also explains why some scholars are universities turning towards other forms of academic collaborations such as development/service-learning initiatives (Larsen & Searle, 2017).

However, despite the challenges, studying in Canada on an IDDP partnership present lots of opportunities for African students. This is what transpires in Anita's assertion:

> We, Africans, have always longed to study in the West to acquire the best education possible that we do not have back home. That's why many parents who can afford to send their kids away for university schooling, do not hesitate despite the cost. IDDPs allows me to reduce the cost of schooling as I can spend half of my program requirement in my home country where school fees are insignificant. In the end, I can graduate with two degrees, one from Canada and the other from home. It's fantastic! I encourage anyone seeking a Canadian education to take this opportunity.

There is, indeed, several advantages for graduating with a Canadian degree for these exchange students. Therefore, IDDPs open the door to a wider job market as these students are legally allowed to work in Canada upon graduation. Furthermore, they can seek permanent residency in Canada, given the Canadian immigration policy that encourages recruitment within this pool of highly trained potential future citizens (Scott, et al., 2015).

Despite her enthusiasm, Anita cautions those students about challenges awaiting them in Canada. She recounts instances when she thought of quitting the program to go back home. She spoke of the frigid winter, the difficulty to connect with others and make friends that she could rely on whenever she felt forlorn and needing some company:

> When my sister passed away back home, I got a call from dad. I never felt so lonely in my life. I was just by myself. I cried. I thought of how close I was to my sister but couldn't leave without risking academic loss as it was right in the middle of a semester. I had no friend to turn to for consolation. It was emotionally tough.

Some students who decide to embark on study-abroad experiences may face a certain level of loneliness. Loneliness and homesickness are themes that have been explored in many studies relating to students who have left homes to study in foreign lands (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). In fact, study-abroad has been described as a double-edge sword that can work against its intended goals. One motivation for study-abroad programs is to compel participants to get involved into the life of their host communities so they can learn from others and share their lives with the host institution. This involvement is key to nurturing cosmopolitan sensibilities (Tarc, 2013). Therefore, members of host communities need to be encouraged to welcome foreigners, at least to be aware of the reasons these students travel from distant places to attend schools instead of staying home. On the other hand, study abroad participants must be aware of the needs to involve themselves into the life of their host communities. This implies attending community events and approaching its members, hoping to forge some friendships.

Instead, there has been studies that have demonstrated how international students have been having difficulty connecting with members of their host communities, therefore forfeiting the primary goal of these programs (Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

After placement abroad experience

When asked about their dreams and hopes after the placement-abroad phase in the programs, these five students have expressed differing visions for their involvements into the IDDPs. As we exchanged, stories of gaps between expectations and lived experiences during IDDPs emerged as the main take away from these students. One has spoken at length about her desire to learn other culture and become a global citizen but remain uncertain about the prospect of having achieved this aspiration. Another expressed her hope to build on lived experiences when back to her home-country to further spread the benefits of engaging diversity for common understandings. These lived experiences are certainly critical to working in transnational and cosmopolitan settings that have become prevalent in current times. This encapsulates Byram's conceptualization of internationalisation activities (2018).

It appears that the IDDP partnerships focus more on administrative matters than on nurturing cosmopolitan values. While the instrumental aspect of these programs is organized, the cosmopolitan values are left to the discretion of each participant.

Implications

The sample of respondents was limited, due to the few potential participants who responded to our request for interviews. This was also due to the difficulty of finding African students in Canada who were involved in such programming with universities in Africa. The few respondents interviewed were all students enrolled in different African universities before joining international double degree programs with a Canadian university.

The findings in this study are limited to the qualitative experience of five participants and yet illuminate the conditions under which the students complete their study abroad. It is hoped that the findings contribute to policy and praxis reforms that will improve conditions and therefore entice many in joining these academic mobility partnerships, improving the flow of students from the Global South to the North and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

The discussion in this paper illuminate how internationalization of higher education in Africa is taking shape despite the financial barriers, the technological challenges, the cultural differences and the risks, and pitfalls. This study has demonstrated the compelling need for collaborative and cooperative partnerships that are inherent to world nations for successful experiences in their long and enduring path towards bettering the human conditions. By applying the Bourdieusian concepts, I illuminated how notions of capital and habitus can create barriers for students who seek to study abroad. Still, the enduring take-away for these research participants remains the aspirations for achieving prosperous and fulfilling lives that unquestionably stand at the horizons of these study-abroad partnerships.

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