

A Reflective Experience of Postgraduate Education in South African Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Postgraduate education is a significant aspect of higher education that has a fundamental influence on the global economy, governance, and social justice. However, most postgraduate students go through diverse experiences as they struggle with constructing their identities toward becoming researchers. This article reflects upon the author's lived experience during his postgraduate education in one of South Africa's higher education institutions (HEIs). Reflecting on the author's lived experience, the article aims to expound on challenges experienced by international postgraduate students in South African HEIs. Based on the lived experience, the author identified six themes that revolve around the experience of international postgraduate students: access to funding; study and work permit; employment opportunities; xenophobic attacks; research supervision; and cultural shock. The study recommends that to ensure that the right knowledge is produced for a knowledge-based economy and evidence-based practice, challenges associated with postgraduate education need to be addressed, with particular emphasis on culture diversity training for international students, development of clear guidelines for postgraduate research supervision, and recruitment of high-potential postgraduate students. The article provides a better understanding of the challenges faced by international postgraduate students in South African HEIs, which adds to the body of knowledge on the experiences of international postgraduate students.

Keywords: access to funding; cultural shock; higher education institutions; international postgraduate students; research supervision



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Introduction

Postgraduate education is a significant aspect of higher education with a more fundamental influence on the global economy, governance, and social justice (Whitty and Mullan 2014). In South Africa, postgraduate education includes qualifications such as a postgraduate diploma, honours, master's, and doctoral degree. The Council on Higher Education (CHE 2023a) highlights that a postgraduate diploma aims to enable practising professionals to develop their reflective competencies by analysing contemporary theoretical perspectives in a specific field of study, coupled with empirical research methods applicable within the field. Moreover, a postgraduate diploma programme aims to develop graduates' understanding of how knowledge in a specific discipline could be applied in the world of work (Saidi 2024). In contrast, an honours degree aims to prepare students for research-based studies such as master's and doctoral degrees. It is designed to consolidate and deepen students' knowledge in a specific discipline and to develop their understanding and application of research methodologies in their fields of study. The master's degree programme is designed to develop students' abilities and capabilities to generate new knowledge, refine and upgrade existing knowledge, and apply new and existing knowledge to societal problems through research and development (CHE 2023a). A doctoral degree, on the other hand, is the highest postgraduate qualification, which prepares students to work independently using cutting-edge theoretical perspectives and empirical research methodologies to push the frontiers of knowledge and develop scholarship capabilities in a specific discipline (CHE 2023a).

The essence of postgraduate education is to develop students' abilities and capabilities to carry out cutting-edge research to generate new knowledge, contribute to the refinement of existing knowledge, engage in scholarship work, develop innovations, and apply the knowledge generated to assist in creating a better understanding of the world and address societal challenges. Lategan (2019) asserts that from a practical point of view, postgraduate education prepares students for career research, innovation, creativity, and knowledge transfer. For this reason, many scholars (Butler-Adam 2018; Penprase 2018) and practitioners consider postgraduate education as the driver of the knowledge economy. Studies (Almeida et al. 2017; Boneva, Golin, and Rauh 2022) have demonstrated that postgraduate students make good captains of industry, technical leaders, managers of complex systems, community builders, and thought leaders. In light of this, most organisations and institutions in the global economy make postgraduate qualifications a vital criterion for appointing people to key positions. It follows from the foregoing that postgraduate education is considered very important to any nation aspiring to participate actively in the global knowledge economy to create and sustain vibrant higher education systems with a quality focus (Tikhonova 2023). At national policy and development planning levels, South Africa identifies postgraduate education as a priority area for targeted interventions to spur its development. In light of this, the Education White Paper (Department of Education 1997) emphasises the need to expand postgraduate programmes and increase postgraduate enrolments as priority

areas for interventions to address shortages in high-end skills required for steering national socioeconomic development.

The importance of postgraduate education, student retention, and completion remains a concern at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide, including South Africa. Watson (2008) noted with much concern that most postgraduate students took significantly longer to graduate than expected, negatively impacting the institution's graduation rate. The CHE (2023a) highlights that the dropout rate of master's and doctoral students continues to increase, which remains a concern for all stakeholders. Wilson and Pool (2024) concur that globally, HEIs are concerned with low enrolment, delayed completion rates, non-completion, and the subsequent smaller number of graduates of master's and doctoral programmes. According to Wilson and Pool (2024), in South African HEIs, evidence suggests that students in social work have a high dropout rate and extended completion times. Banda and Zungu (2024) also acknowledge that although South African universities are ranked high among African universities, making the country a popular destination for international students within Africa and beyond, there is a dearth of research on students' lived experiences, from access to their attainment of postgraduate qualifications. Therefore, this article responds to the call by Banda and Zungu (2024) by reflecting on the author's experience with postgraduate education in one of the South African HEIs. This article is guided by the following research objectives:

- To analyse the rationale behind the author's choice of postgraduate education in South African HEIs.
- To describe the author's lived experience during his postgraduate studies in South African HEIs.
- To examine the author's lived experience with the challenges experienced by international postgraduate students in South African HEIs.
- To discuss the author's success story in pursuing postgraduate education in South African HEIs.

Literature Review

The Nature of Postgraduate Education in South African Higher Education Institutions

The value of postgraduate education in South Africa has been well documented by the CHE and the Department of Education (DoE) since apartheid. House (2010) argues that postgraduate education is a further study undertaken by people with an undergraduate degree. It is frequently used to refer to master's or doctoral studies but also includes certificates, diplomas and honours. In South Africa, postgraduate education leads to qualifications at levels 8 (postgraduate diploma and honours) to 10 (doctoral degree) (CHE 2023a). A postgraduate diploma aims to enable practising professionals to develop their reflective competencies by analysing contemporary theoretical perspectives in a particular discipline, coupled with empirical research methods

applicable within the discipline. Although it is not a requirement, studies toward a postgraduate diploma often include a supervised mini-dissertation leading to an examinable research report. Boud and Malloy (2013, 9) opine that a “postgraduate diploma is intended to develop in students a common language to share experiences and build capacity for evaluative self-judgement over time.” According to Boud and Malloy (2013), evaluative self-judgement is fundamental to learning disciplinary concepts and theories underpinning knowledge development in specific professions. Statistics reveal that students enrolled for postgraduate diplomas and honours degrees in South African HEIs constituted 47% of all postgraduate students in 2005, 50% in 2010, 43% in 2015, and 45% in 2020 (CHE 2023b).

According to the CHE (2023a), an honours degree prepares students for research-based further studies, leading to higher qualifications such as a master’s and doctorate. This qualification is designed to consolidate and deepen students’ knowledge in a specific discipline and develop their understanding and application of research methodologies. Thus, an honours degree aims to provide the graduate with advanced disciplinary knowledge and research training and enables them to complete an independent research project. Manathunga (2017) shares a similar view that honours programmes are designed to develop students’ capacities to engage in higher-order thinking, leading to knowledge production. Jansen and Suhre (2015) advocate that honours programmes should offer opportunities for high-ability students to meet social and scientific needs and foster graduate attributes. Butler-Adam (2018) and Xing, Marwala, and Marwala (2018) state that honours and postgraduate diploma graduates are expected to possess the high-end skills and competencies necessary for the knowledge economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Within the South African higher education context, an honours programme is usually an additional year of advanced study, which is awarded separately as an honours degree (Bawa 2008).

Paxton (2011) posits that most honours programmes in South Africa are similar to those of the Australian description. This programme is seen as a bridge between undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Thus, an honours programme is not necessarily a postgraduate or an undergraduate degree but a programme somewhere between postgraduate and undergraduate studies. The CHE (2023a) reports that some students register for honours degrees to remain within higher education while looking for employment. Once they secure a job, they do not enrol for master’s and doctorate degrees. Therefore, it can be argued that the enrolment for honours degrees is for reasons that are not related to articulating and progressing toward master’s and doctoral degrees.

In the current global economy, a master’s degree is now the new bachelor’s because it is the stepping stone for one’s career launch. Hopper (2014) observes that many years ago, it became very clear that master’s education was increasing rapidly to become the entry requirement in several professions and occupations. According to Shulsinger (2017), obtaining a master’s degree helps graduates to gain specialised knowledge to advance in their fields. Also, Shulsinger (2017) adds that a master’s degree encourages

lifelong learning among people at different life stages. Phillpott (2017) asserts that a master's degree allows people to network with others in the industry. In committing to grow postgraduate education, national plans and policy documents, such as the National Development Plan (NDP), White Paper on the Post-school Education and Training and Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), place much emphasis on the need to increase enrolments and graduates at master's and doctoral levels. As discussed previously, the primary aim of a master's programme is to develop graduates' abilities and capabilities to generate new knowledge or enhance existing knowledge, and to apply new and existing knowledge to real-world societal challenges through research and development.

In South African HEIs, the recommended timeframe for completing a master's degree is two years (Saidi 2024). From 2011 to 2020, a total of 207 students enrolled for a master's degree in social work at public universities. However, only four students graduated within the recommended timeframe (Wilson and Pool 2024). The CHE (2023a) has expressed concern about the dropout rate of master's students in South African HEIs. The CHE (2023b) states that the postgraduate students who enrolled for master's degrees represented 45% of all postgraduate students in 2005, 50% in 2010, 43% in 2015, and 45% in 2020. Of the 2015 national postgraduate intake, "41% had dropped out by 2020 without completing their degrees, and for the cohort of postgraduate students enrolled for master's degrees by coursework, 51% had dropped out by 2020 without completing their studies" (Saidi 2024, 13). The CHE (2022) reports that after 2005, most postgraduate students took longer years to complete their master's degree studies, such that by 2020, on average, students took 3.56 years to complete their studies towards a master's degree. The analysis of these statistics suggests that postgraduate education experiences relatively high dropout rates, which implies that a significant proportion of students exit the system without completing their studies.

The most commonly cited reason for the decline in throughput and graduation rates of master's students is the supervision relationship. Studies suggest that most students experience confusion, anxiety, and alienation due to a lack of clarity regarding the norms and expectations of the supervision relationship (Essa 2011; Evans and Stevenson 2010).

The shift toward a knowledge economy and innovation highlights the need for doctoral graduates in South Africa and beyond. Arguably, a doctoral qualification is the highest education degree an individual can acquire. Waghid (2011) postulates that the vital role assigned to HEIs in contemporary society renders doctoral education the pinnacle of university education and a matter of immeasurable importance. It is undeniable that doctoral education remains prominent in the higher education research agenda worldwide because of its contribution toward creating and producing new knowledge. For this reason, the South African government aspires to increase the number of doctoral graduates fivefold by 2030. In South Africa, the primary focus of doctoral education is to build the human resource base for the knowledge economy. In 2018, the

“Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees” was published, which sets benchmarks for CHE-acceptable quality of doctoral qualifications offered by South African HEIs. Two sets of graduate attributes were set to improve doctoral qualification standards: knowledge and skills. The purpose and level of the doctoral qualification can only be achieved when these attributes are part of the candidates’ doctoral degree. Hunt (2003) defines knowledge as a belief that is true and justified. From the perspective of the Organisational Knowledge Creation Theory, Nonaka (1991) postulates that knowledge creation occurs through the interaction of tacit and explicit knowledge involving four modes of knowledge conversion. In South Africa and beyond, doctoral theses are required to value the original contribution to knowledge in their fields. Knowledge forms the foundation of creative thinking, which involves discovering new phenomena, developing or inventing new tools and creating new concepts (Min 2022). This implies that doctoral candidates are expected to discover new phenomena, develop new methods and create new concepts that add value to organisations and societies. CHE (2023, 11) identifies five knowledge-related graduate attributes that doctoral candidates must possess: 1) “broad, well informed, and current knowledge of a field or discipline; 2) expert, specialised, and in-depth current knowledge of a specific area of research; 3) insight into the interconnectedness of one’s topic with other cognate fields; 4) Ethical awareness in research and professional conduct; 5) an original contribution to a field of study.”

Besides knowledge contribution, doctoral candidates are required to possess some specific skills to meet the demands of employers. In this vein, Chaló et al. (2023) posit that institutions have a shared responsibility to develop the competencies of doctoral students to produce highly skilled professionals who can make significant contributions to sustainable development, both within and outside academia. From Freire’s Pedagogy of Freedom standpoint, students are encouraged to take ownership of their research projects and work collaboratively with their supervisors to develop critical thinking skills and autonomy (Freire 1998). In South Africa, the Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees identifies four skills-related graduate attributes at the doctoral degree level: 1) “evaluation, selection and application of appropriate research approaches, methodologies, and processes in the pursuit of a research objective; 2) reflection and autonomy; 3) communication skills, including relevant information and digital literacy skills; 4) critical and analytical thinking for problem-solving” (CHE 2023).

However, it has been noted that the massification and diversification that accompany doctoral education have raised concerns about its quality. The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf 2010) reports that doctoral production in South Africa is low, although there has been steady growth in recent years. Evidence shows that South Africa produced only 1 274 doctoral graduates in 2007 (ASSAf 2010, 16). This translates to 26 doctoral graduates per million of the total country population, which is low compared to advanced and upper-middle-income countries, such as the United Kingdom (288), Brazil (52), and Mexico (28). According to the CHE (2023b), the total number of doctoral students enrolled in 2005 was 9 434, 1 590 in 2010, 19 513 in 2015, and 23 588

in 2020. These statistics indicate there was a six-fold increase in the headcount of candidates enrolled for doctoral degrees between 1995 and 2020 (CHE 2023b). The rapid increase in doctoral enrolments, primarily since 2005, has raised growing concerns about the quality of doctoral graduates and their theses. Van Schalkwyk et al. (2020) claim that while several measures were implemented to ensure that doctoral graduates meet the standard, anecdotal evidence suggests that the quality of doctoral education is already being compromised in some instances. It has been found that, while, on average, postgraduate students took 4.6 and 4.7 years to complete their doctoral degrees in 2000 and 2005, respectively, the average period it took students to complete the same qualification had increased to 5.21 years in 2020 (CHE 2022). Although doctoral candidates spent longer years completing their studies, statistics suggest that the number of doctoral graduates increased threefold during the 15 years between 2005 and 2020 to reach 3 552 in 2020 (CHE 2023b). The overall picture seems to suggest that despite the longer years studying, postgraduate students, especially those at master's and doctoral levels, are succeeding in their studies. This observation contradicts the report by ASSAf (2010), which states that doctoral production in South Africa is low.

Economic and Social Contribution of Higher Education Institutions in Modern Context

In recent times, employers, practitioners, academics, researchers, policymakers and governments have shown increased interest in the relevance of HEIs. Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson (2020) claim that complex global issues, including climate change, migration, and the Covid-19 pandemic, have increased the pressure on HEIs to accumulate resources, knowledge, and expertise for the common good. In their study, Pouris and Inglesi-Lotz (2014) suggested that HEIs contribute to social and economic development through four major missions: human capital formation and development, the building of knowledge bases, dissemination and use of knowledge, and knowledge maintenance. Volchik, Oganessian, and Olejarz (2018) believe that within the context of globalised markets and localised research and development structures, HEIs become a vital tool for facilitating economic performance. In the European Union, HEIs have proven to be a vital vehicle for mitigating social inequalities by developing social interventions appropriate to the community's needs (Bayuo et al. 2020). According to Trinh (2023), a higher education institution is a production chain whose output is qualified human resources that serve as the foundation for forming and developing the innovative capacity to serve a country's development and contribute to human knowledge.

Similarly, Chankseliani, Qoraboyev, and Gimranova (2021) note that HEIs significantly contribute to human capital development. Chankseliani et al. (2021) argue that HEIs improve a country's skills and knowledge base through teaching and research, leading to national economic development. Thus, HEIs continue to educate citizens, politicians, teachers, doctors, engineers, philosophers, lawyers, artists, and activists to support national development. In South Africa, HEIs have worked closely with the DHET to promote entrepreneurship education across all public universities (Sebola 2023). This

ensures that university graduates acquire entrepreneurship knowledge to contribute to national development.

The Rationale and Motivation for International Education

According to Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2020), students' choice to study in host countries is the first step toward the most important revolution in their academic career, especially for those whose degree necessitates staying for an extended period. The author has obtained three postgraduate qualifications (i.e., honours, master's, and doctorate) from one of South Africa's HEIs in 2016, 2017 and 2021, respectively. The author's experience of postgraduate education in South African HEIs is dated back to 2015, when he first joined the university as an honours student to pursue a Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Industrial Relations. Several factors influenced the author's choice to pursue postgraduate education at South African HEIs. This rationale is discussed below.

Career Prospects

The primary reason behind the author's choice to pursue postgraduate studies in South Africa was the career prospects. The university of choice is among the few HEIs in Africa and beyond, offering a postgraduate degree in industrial/employment relations. It is imperative to note that (at the time of writing) no single university in the author's country offers an appropriate degree or qualification in Industrial Relations. This assertion is consistent with a study by Eder, Smith, and Pitts (2010), who claim that career growth is considered one of the pull factors for studying abroad. Likewise, Hung and Yen (2020) posit that students' motivation and career planning positively correlate with their decision-making process to study in host nations. In a similar study, Yasmin and Slaninová (2022) acknowledged that academic pursuits influenced international students' decision to attain higher education in China.

Costs of International Education

According to Al-Rahmi et al. (2020), the choice for education abroad requires a significant investment of time and money. In the author's view, pursuing postgraduate education in South Africa is much cheaper than in other African and European countries. Although many HEIs, such as the University of Kent, University of Newcastle, University of Aberdeen, University of Essex, and Kingston University, to mention a few, around the world offer postgraduate degrees in Industrial Relations, South African HEIs have relatively low tuition fees and reasonable living standards compared to other countries. For instance, in 2023, the average tuition fee for a Bachelor of Commerce Honours ranged between R32 000 to R58 000, master's between R29 000 to R80 000, and doctoral degree between R23 810 to R27 000 (CHE 2023b). On the contrary, the annual tuition fees for postgraduate education in European and other countries are high. For instance, in Canada, the annual tuition fee (2024) for postgraduate education ranged between \$32 606 (regular MBA) to \$67 706 (Statistics Canada 2024). Therefore, the

comparative analysis suggests that pursuing postgraduate education in South Africa is cheaper than in the rest of European countries.

Quality of Education

The quality of education in South Africa influenced the author's choice to pursue his postgraduate education in this country. This article contends that South Africa has the best quality education system compared to the rest of the African countries, such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Egypt. Although policymakers and other stakeholders have raised serious concerns about the declining quality of South African HEIs (DHET 2019; Spaull 2013), it is still far better than other African nations. This assertion is consistent with Kasese-Hara and Mugambi (2021), who argue that South Africa has, in the last decades, embraced the growing trend of internationalisation in higher education, resulting in greater international mobility of staff and students. Undisputedly, South Africa has a larger capacity to meet the needs of students within the African continent. Likewise, Banda and Zungu (2024) opine that most South African universities are ranked high among African universities, making the country a popular destination for international students within Africa and beyond.

Infrastructure Development and Education Facilities

In addition, the author's choice of postgraduate education in South Africa was influenced by infrastructure development and good education facilities. It is undeniable that learning settings or environments positively or negatively affect students' academic achievements. This article contends that students' performance can be improved through better physical learning environments. This notion is supported by Liljenberg, Nordholm, and Årlestig (2024), who argue that prevailing infrastructures mainly emphasise rational understandings of knowledge and people and practical skills, promoting quality teaching and learning. According to the DHET (2017), within the African continent, South Africa is the top destination for African international students because of many factors, including but not limited to education facilities and infrastructure development.

Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity has been widely recognised as an essential strategic tool for promoting collaboration and equity within institutional settings. South Africa is one of the few countries in the world that is culturally diverse and inclusive. South Africa has a multicultural education that enhances teaching and learning. Compared to other countries, South Africa has four population groups with different cultures: African, Indian, Coloured, and White.

The Lived Experience of Postgraduate Education in South Africa

There is a common consensus that challenges and negative experiences influence postgraduate students' non-completion. Delnoij et al. (2020) observe that HEIs across

the globe are more concerned about low enrolment, delayed completion rate, non-completion, and a smaller number of graduates of master's and doctoral programmes. Therefore, this article shares the author's lived experience of postgraduate education in one of the South African HEIs.

Access to Funding and Scholarships

The most pressing challenge the author experienced as an international postgraduate student was access to funding and scholarships. Many international postgraduate students have no or limited access to funding and scholarships. In South African HEIs, international postgraduate students, especially those in business administration, face the unprecedented challenge of access to scholarship opportunities because of limited budget allocation (Sonn 2016). This is contrary to European countries, where most international postgraduate students have access to several scholarship opportunities based on academic merit; however, in South African HEIs, such opportunities are mostly available only to locals.

This claim is substantiated by Biyela (2019), who found that most international students at one of the South African HEIs faced financial pressure, especially those who did not get financial aid and had to pay tuition and living expenses all by themselves. Moreover, there is a common consensus that most African countries, especially Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Togo, to mention a few, have no or limited scholarships for their citizens to study abroad. Even the limited scholarships available are not awarded to needy but brilliant students. Instead, they are awarded to students whose families are politicians and highly influential. Recently, the Ghanaian government and Scholarship Secretariat have come under the spotlight for awarding scholarships to politicians and elite families. These findings concur with a study done by Ndlovu (2012, 1), who states, "although scholarships are meant to be awarded to students from disadvantaged or impoverished rural backgrounds, they are being hijacked by the elite and corrupt people connected to senior government officials."

Study and Work Permits

Another lived experience of the author as an international postgraduate student was access to study and work permits. Most international students in South Africa have continued to struggle with immigration policy controls, which are viewed as unfair with stringent conditions that must be complied with. From personal experience, most international students, especially those from the African continent, struggle to obtain study and work permits on time, posing several challenges for their academic careers. The author's wife, a doctoral student in one of the South African HEIs, has still not received the renewal of her study permit after two years. This delay affects several international students, especially those who wish to visit their parent countries. This experience is supported by a study conducted by Biyela (2019), who established that international students at one of the South African HEIs expressed that they struggled to obtain their study permits on time. Johnson and Carciotto (2017) claim that media

reports link the migration of foreigners into South Africa with irregular and criminal behaviour, which prompts authorities to enforce restrictive policies. Similarly, Carciotto (2021) acknowledges that political rhetoric and the migration-security nexus account for a widespread perception that migration policies have become more restrictive. Studies (Dinbabo and Nyasulu 2015; Nzabamwita and Dinbabo 2022; Tambo, Ernie, and Pienaar 2016) have also confirmed that bureaucratic hurdles, as well as administrative and documentation problems, prohibit or delay international migrants and their families from obtaining permits.

Employment Opportunities

The lack of employment opportunities was also a significant factor experienced by the author during his postgraduate education. Compared to developed nations, such as the United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, and France, there are limited employment opportunities for international postgraduate students in South Africa. South Africa has several unprogressive employment laws, such as the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995, Employment Services Act 4 of 2014, and Immigration Act 13 of 2002, all of which limit the recruitment of foreigners into South African organisations, especially the public service. While some provisions in these legislative frameworks are welcome as they address various teething problems experienced by migrants, regrettably, others are anti-progress.

During the author's 10 years of experience in South Africa, it was observed that most jobs are reserved for designated candidates. This regulatory framework demotivates several qualified individuals who study in South African HEIs. After completing a doctorate in 2021, the author has still not successfully obtained full-time academic employment in a South African HEI. There is a common perception among South Africans that foreigners have taken away their jobs. They fear that African immigrants will deprive them of employment opportunities and living space. This assertion is supported by Gao (2022), who established that over the years, many South Africans, primarily Blacks, have protested, claiming that African migrants have taken away their jobs and lowered the country's overall employment rate.

Xenophobic Attacks

The author's first experience of xenophobia is dated back to 2015 during his time as an honours student. Xenophobia is considered one of the most endemic, life-threatening problems affecting foreign nationals in contemporary South Africa and other parts of the world. This hate crime has increased unabatedly, especially in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, diffusing to other cities, including Johannesburg, Pretoria, Limpopo, and Cape Town. Although the incident was not officially reported at any of the South African HEIs, it affected the author's studies by not being able to attend lectures for three weeks due to safety concerns. The author agrees with other scholars and human rights activists who claim that xenophobia is untreated, anti-immigrant violence and a

potential blight on the South African international reputation and economy. Olofinbiyi (2022) established that xenophobic violence and attitudes were not new, but a recurrent social phenomenon in South Africa. “In 1998, a Mozambican national was thrown from a moving train, coupled with the incident of two Senegalese who were electrocuted when they attempted to escape the violence unleashed on them by a group of South Africans returning from an ‘unemployed masses of South Africa’ rally in Pretoria” (Tella 2016, 142). Such antagonism towards and hatred of African migrants elicit reactions that are often accompanied by physical and psychological violence.

Nature of Research Supervision

The nature of research supervision was an important experience for the author during his postgraduate education in South Africa. The author’s honours and master’s journeys progressed smoothly because of the cooperation and understanding between student and supervisor. At the initial stage of this honours and master’s journey, the research supervisor made it clear that he would only provide little assistance because of the author’s intellectual capability and research knowledge. This challenged him to work extra hard to avoid major corrections and criticisms from examiners. Although the author had limited supervisor support, his postgraduate studies at the honours and master’s levels were completed within a year.

However, his doctoral journey was very challenging and frustrating. Completion of the doctoral research proposal took almost three years due to various factors including, but not limited to, conceptual understanding of the research topic. It is imperative to note that despite the delay, the author has produced an outstanding doctoral thesis because the supervisor had challenged him to think outside the box. This experience of research supervision has been reaffirmed in a study by Van der Laan et al. (2021), who discovered that postgraduate student attrition and failure to compete metrics were at worryingly low levels, which could be attributed to inadequate supervisory and institutional support. A similar study by Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021) acknowledged that while most students felt supported by their supervisors, others strongly felt unsupported and neglected.

Cultural Shock

The world is rapidly becoming increasingly dimensional—culturally and linguistically. In the first three years of the author’s stay in South Africa, he felt deeply isolated because of the cultural shock. This phenomenon negatively affected his psychological and sociocultural adaptation to the South African environment, thereby impacting his studies. Despite the author’s conviction that we are all Africans, he was unable to associate with other people because of the unfamiliarity of the national South African culture, including the food we eat and the language we speak. Despite the cultural adjustment challenge, the author observed that when compared to other countries, South Africa has a diverse culture that accommodates everyone irrespective of their nationality. This concurs with the findings by Almukdad and Karadag (2024), who state

that international students from different countries are more likely to experience greater cultural shock as they age. Due to the negative feelings, most international students cannot handle the new environment, leading to adjustment challenges. On the contrary, Lin (2006, 8) contests that not all international students experience culture shock, but that it depends on several factors, such as “the severity of the person’s reaction to a new culture, the extent of control over the reaction, interpersonal, biological, spatial-temporal, and geopolitical factors, lack of accommodation, and religious and language barriers.”

Success Story and Lived Experience of Postgraduate Education in South Africa

Overwhelming evidence shows that international postgraduate students face a myriad of challenges during their studies abroad, including in South Africa. However, many such studies only focused on the negative experiences of international postgraduate students, with little emphasis placed on the success stories. This article highlights the success story of the author’s lived experience during his postgraduate studies in South African HEIs.

- Firstly, postgraduate education in South Africa has improved the author’s academic writing skills. According to Gupta et al. (2022), academic writing skills are vital for a successful graduate programme, especially at the doctoral level. There is a shared expectation that postgraduate students write in a scholarly manner for their theses and publications. The opportunity for postgraduate education in South Africa enhanced the author’s academic writing skills because specific training and workshops on academic writing were provided to all students. At the author’s university, academic writing has been integrated into the formal training of postgraduate students from the beginning of the programme. These interventions are rare in HEIs in other jurisdictions.
- Secondly, postgraduate education in South Africa has improved the author’s scholarly research skills. Research is considered a major component of postgraduate education, especially at the master’s and doctoral levels. Therefore, postgraduate students are required to undertake a scholarly research journey under the supervisory guidance of a senior, qualified academic in a particular discipline. Through supervisory support, such as constructive feedback and workshops, the author has improved his scholarly research skills. Moreover, his research and publication skills have improved by evaluating and synthesising information, research collaboration and communicating with supervisors and peers. This is consistent with Mydin, Rahman, and Mohammad (2021), who point out that research collaboration activities substantially impact young academics in updating their research knowledge and skills, making them more confident in their ability to manage research independently.
- Thirdly, the author’s critical thinking skills have been improved due to his postgraduate education in South African HEIs. Raj et al. (2022, 126) postulate that

“critical thinking denotes one’s capacity to think clearly and reasonably about what to believe. An important purpose of education is to produce well-informed graduates capable of grasping significant, useful, beautiful, and powerful ideas.” The opportunity for postgraduate education in South African HEIs has increased the author’s self-confidence, reflection skills, and self-assurance, also allowing him to analyse and look at situations creatively and productively. Moreover, postgraduate education in South Africa has increased his employment prospects because, in a fast-changing environment, companies prefer graduates with sharp critical thinking abilities.

- Lastly, the opportunity for postgraduate education in South Africa has exposed the author to new cultures and languages. South Africa is a diverse country with different cultures, languages and racial groups, such as African, Indian, White, Coloured, and foreign nationals. South Africa is rich in culture and a common destination for many African and European migrants. His postgraduate education has enabled the author to interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Limitations of the Study and Direction for Future Research

Although the paper provides a better understanding of the challenges experienced by postgraduate international students, it only reflects the lived experience of the author in a South African HIE. Hence, the findings could not be generalised to international postgraduate students in South African HEIs. There is a need for further research to interrogate the lived experiences of international postgraduate students in South African HEIs.

Implications for Postgraduate Education Policy

An important implication of this study is that it sheds more light on the lived experience of the corresponding author in South African HEIs. To ensure that the right knowledge is produced for the knowledge-based economy and evidence-based practice and to increase the number of motivated graduate scholars, the study recommends that challenges associated with postgraduate education need to be addressed. Particular emphasis should be placed on cultural diversity training for international students, the development of clear guidelines for postgraduate research supervision, access to scholarship and employment opportunities, and recruitment of high-potential postgraduate students. Also, to increase the enrolment of international postgraduate students in South African HEIs, the Department of Training and Higher Education, Home Affairs, and HEIs must work hand-in-hand to remove the restrictive barriers associated with obtaining study permits.

Conclusion

The paper reflects the lived experience of the author in South African HEIs, with much focus on the challenges faced by international postgraduate students. The paper analysed the author’s lived experience by discussing critical challenges associated with

postgraduate education in South African HEIs, including access to funding and scholarships, access to study and work permits, employment opportunities, research supervision, and cultural shock. In addition, the paper highlights the success story of the author's postgraduate education in one of the South African HEIs. Notwithstanding the negative experience of the author, it is worth pursuing postgraduate education in South African HEIs, given the quality and global ranking of their education. Despite the challenges faced by international postgraduate students in South Africa, it is still a preferred destination for many African students for reasons articulated in this article.

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