

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A cost benefits analysis of international education: A case of Zimbabwean students in South Africa**

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Accepted 12 March, 2012

**The study investigated the costs and benefits of international education to Zimbabwean students studying in South African Universities. The objectives of the study were to investigate the actual and perceived benefits of international education to students. The study also investigated the impact of international education on the lives of students, their societies and the development of their country. Challenges faced by Zimbabwean students studying in South Africa were also identified and discussed. A combination of qualitative and quantitative (triangular) research methods was used to collect primary data. A questionnaire with both open ended and closed questions was used. Zimbabwean students studying at Universities in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa were the target population and a sample of a hundred was selected to complete the questionnaires. The results showed that the benefits of studying in South Africa outweigh the costs to Zimbabwean students. Recommendations are given to Zimbabwean students, governments and the universities.**

**Key words:** Costs, benefits, international education, students, challenges.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The internationalisation of education has become a major focus of international attention. According to Crichton and Scarino (2007), this is reflected by a substantial and expanding literature on how internationalisation is manifested, how it can be promoted and its implications for areas such as student mobility. It is mainly because of globalisation that the internationalisation of education in various countries is happening at a rapid pace (Guo and Chase, 2011: 305). Internationalisation represents the positive exchange of ideas and people. It also recognises and respects differences and traditions between nations (Gacel-A´vila, 2005).

Altbach (2004) states that by year 2004, about 2 million students worldwide were studying outside their home countries and the number is expected to rise to more than 8 million by year 2025. Marginson and van der Wende (2007) pointed out that there is no doubt that higher education has been swept up in global marketisation. In South Africa, Mpanganjira (2010) noted

that the government in conjunction with its institutions of higher learning has taken deliberate measures aimed at attracting students from other countries. International students are represented at every South African University. South Africa has long been a preferred destination for students from other countries, especially in Southern Africa (IEASA, 2008). The country has become the most popular place to study in Africa, and is one of the world's top twenty host nations for American students. According to IEASA (2008), more than one in every 10 students was non-South African at the Universities of Fort Hare and University of South Africa (UNISA) in 2008. It is also important to note that most international students are from Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. They point out that 71% of all South Africa's international students are from neighbouring nations.

The number of international students studying in South Africa has grown dramatically since the attainment of

independence in 1994 from 12600 to more than 64000 in 2008, which is nearly 8% of the total students registered at South African public universities (IEASA, 2008). Zimbabwe is the major source country sending 27% in 2006 of all international students. The number rose to 39% in 2008.

The choice by a growing number of international students of South Africa as a place to study can prove the quality of the country's universities and the international standing of their academics and qualifications. According to Mpinganjira (2010), South Africa is the country of choice not only to African students but also for those outside the continent.

There has been an increase in the number of international students in South Africa since 1994. Most of these students come from Zimbabwe. Considering the fact that Zimbabwe has also increased the number of its tertiary education institutions, it is important to investigate the reasons why some Zimbabwean students still study in South Africa. The study investigates the costs and benefits of studying in South Africa to Zimbabwean students.

While significant research is available to explore the notion of higher education choice and decision making by local students, there is little research to explore similar issues in the context of international students (Alam et al., 2010; Maringe and Carter, 2007). Mazzarol (1998) and Maringe and Carter (2007) found that the decision to study abroad is one of the most important initiatives that students may ever undertake. The decision thus requires careful consideration on students' part. The objectives of the study include:

- (i) To investigate the actual and perceived benefits of international education to Zimbabwean students;
- (ii) To identify the costs of international students studying in South Africa;
- (iii) To determine the impact of international education on the lives of students, their societies and the development of their country; and
- (iv) To investigate the challenges faced by Zimbabwean students studying in South Africa.

International education is a service offered by different nations. There has been competition in recent years and countries now come up with different strategies to promote international education and attract foreign students. This study can be useful to governments, universities and can even be used by international students themselves. The government and universities can use the study to improve their marketing strategies by taking into consideration the perceived costs and benefits of studying in South Africa to students from other countries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Cost benefit analysis

Another way to make wise decisions is to analyse and assess the costs and the benefits of taking a certain action or of making a certain decision. A cost benefit analysis is a strategy or tool that is used in decision making; it sums up all costs and benefits. If the costs outweigh the benefits, then it will not be wise to proceed with the decision or action. A decision can be made and can only be termed worthy if the benefits that will arise outweigh all the costs. This strategy is fairly easy to use as people can predict the benefits and the costs associated with certain actions and decisions.

The cost benefit analysis can be used together with the well known SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis, analyses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats before a decision is made. It can also be used together with the risk reward assessment, a tool that can be used to analyse all risks and rewards before making a decision.

### Factors affecting students to study in South Africa

According to IEASA (2008), the factors that can be said to be driving force on the choices of international students include: geographic region, historical connections between countries, language, perceived quality of the country's education and its accessibility, affordability and the employability of the qualifications that are obtained.

#### *Geographic region*

South Africa is considered close geographically to most African Countries. For Zimbabwean students, it is actually very close considering that fact that the countries share the same border and they are both in Southern Africa.

#### *Historical connections between countries*

Some international students, study in South Africa mainly because of strong historical connections and agreements between nations.

#### *Language*

Although there are eleven official languages in South Africa, the country uses English as the primary language

of instruction. The use of English attracts many students from other countries for they will not be forced to learn any other language as the case with other countries. According to Bates (2001), English is the predominant language as far as international education is concerned.

### ***Perceived quality of the country's education***

Yang (2007) indicated that, students that are more likely to get qualified are favoured and well recognised by employers in their home countries. Universities in South Africa offer internationally recognised qualifications. The qualifications are perceived to be of higher quality by international students and are respected in many African countries.

### ***Accessibility and affordability***

South Africa boasts with a higher education sector that is accessible. It also has relatively lower cost of living. Mpanganjira (2010) is of the view that the cost of studying and living are relatively low in South Africa. For some students, studying abroad may be the only way of accessing tertiary education due to access related problems in their own countries (Alam, 2009). Common access related challenges include unavailability of courses of choice in home institutions as well as inability of students to meet highly competitive entry requirements that may be in place due to high demand exceeding supply (Mpanganjira, 2009; Mazzarol and Souter, 2002).

### ***The employability of the qualifications obtained.***

Now that South Africa is considered the most developed country in Southern Africa, most students will want to be employed within the country. It is easier for international students to get jobs in South Africa if they have the country's qualifications. According to Mpanganjira (2009) and Cubillo et al. (2006), international students' mobility can be caused by the students' need to access high quality education and also to broaden their own personal experiences.

### ***Modern and technology advanced facilities***

There is improved access to modern technology (for example, the use of computers and access to internet) in most South African universities. This makes learning easy and meaningful not only to international students but to all students in the country.

### ***Other reasons***

Other factors that can drive international students to choose to study in South Africa include the ability to work part time; and failure to secure a study place in their preferred study countries. The belief that studying in South Africa can improve chances of migrating is also another important factor.

### ***Higher education in Zimbabwe***

There has been an increase in the number of institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe after her independence in 1980. Despite this increase, access to tertiary education was affected by various factors. The factors include: limited number of tertiary institutions, the ability of students to pay fees and also the entry requirements.

Although, most candidates satisfied minimum entry requirements, Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning are forced to only enrol those with high qualifications because of the large number of applicants and competition. According to UNESCO (2001), Zimbabwean universities are forced to only enrol those with ten or more points at Advanced (A) level when the entry requirement is only two points. This means many well-qualified candidates fail to gain access into tertiary education.

### ***Improving access to tertiary education in Zimbabwe***

UNESCO (2001) mentioned that at the beginning of the 1990s very few school leavers in Zimbabwe were accessing education. This was because of competition among candidates and as a result, institutions introduced stringent entry requirements that excluded the bulk of candidates who qualify. In 2001, the ministry responsible for tertiary education and training had embarked on a drive to improve access to tertiary education (UNESCO, 2008). The number of Universities increased from one in 1990 to eight full fledged universities and three university colleges in 2001.

The establishment of Vocational Training Centres (VTCs) around the country also improved access to tertiary education and training in Zimbabwe. VTCs are skills training centres and their target groups include school drop outs, retrenched people and other school leavers. According to the Zimbabwe's Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education (2010), Zimbabwe have more than 12 public universities, more than 15 polytechnic colleges, 4 industrial training centres, 12 teachers' colleges and more than 790 registered Higher Education Examination Council (HEXCO) college centres.

## METHODOLOGY

A combination of qualitative and quantitative (triangular) research methods was used to collect primary data. A pretested questionnaire with both open ended and closed questions was used. Zimbabwean students studying at Universities in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa were the target population and a sample of hundred students was selected to complete the questionnaires. Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique was applied to select the respondents. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square. The chi-square test for independence was used to test for association. It is used most frequently to test the statistical significance of results. The chi-square test allows one to either accept or reject the null hypothesis.

Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Content Analysis obtains data by observing and analysing the content message of, for example, reports and letters. It involves systematic analysis, as well as observation to identify the specific information content and characteristics of the message (Zikmund, 2003: 248). This technique measures the extent of emphasis or omission of emphasis on any analytical category. Once all the collected common themes were drawn from the data to a point where new insights could be inferred or drawn into constructs or factors, the various factors were then further coded as different costs and benefits. From this analysis, a final conclusion was reached, clearly outlining the costs and benefits of studying in South Africa to Zimbabwean students.

## RESULTS

### Population characteristics

Of the hundred questionnaires distributed, 80 questionnaires were completed and returned. 45 (45) of the respondents were male and 35 were female. 70 (87.5%) respondents agreed that the benefits outweighed the costs, yet 10 (12.5%) were of the view that costs of studying in South Africa actually outweigh the benefits. 58 (72.5%) of the respondents are either on a scholarship or hold a bursary. The remainder are either self funded or are funded by their parents.

### Benefits

The benefits of studying in South Africa as identified by the respondents (international students) include: career benefits, personal confidence etc.

### *Economic and career benefits*

As South Africa is said to be the most developed nation in the Southern Africa, 55% of the interviewed international students are attracted to study in this country.

They also hope to benefit from career opportunities in the country. Higher education is undertaken at a certain cost in order to increase future earnings and employment opportunities (Carla et al., 2004). Maringe and Carter (2007) found that opportunities to work part time can also have an impact on financial costs associated with studying abroad. On the other hand, Bates (2001) is of the view that students can choose to study outside their country to either make money or to save money.

### *International perspective*

More than 80% of foreign students who participated in this study mentioned that studying in South Africa enhanced their international perspectives. They have become global minded and have developed an increased understanding of cultural differences.

The cultural diversity of the modern university provides rich opportunities for developing 'a more globalized sense of responsibility and citizenship' (Kahane, 2009: 49). It also prepares learners for a world that is interdependent and interconnected (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004). Such diversity, if embraced, can support academics to operate beyond their local and national perspectives that dominate pedagogy in higher education (Trahor and Hyland, 2011).

### *Personal development*

All of the respondents (100%) indicated that studying in a foreign country allows for personal development and transformation. This includes increased self confidence and maturity in decision making.

### *Increased intellectual development*

Close to 60% of the respondents agreed that intellectual development can be enhanced if one takes on the challenge to study in a foreign country. This also includes the advantage of acquiring a second language. Studying in another country allows for personal growth.

### *Variety of study areas*

It was clear from the respondents' views that more courses are offered at both undergraduate and postgraduate level in South Africa than in other nations within Africa. This was mentioned as a benefit by about 76% of the respondents. The fact that this is a benefit to students and it can attract international students is supported by Bates (2001) who mentioned that students

sometimes study outside their home country to make use of the opportunities that may not be available in their own country.

### ***Subsidies in South Africa***

The fact that South African education is subsidised was mentioned by most (85%) of the respondents. This means that the government also invest revenue in its education system. Subsidised education means lower cost on the students. The fact that this benefit extends to SADC students makes it an advantage to foreign students who will want to study in South Africa. Subsidies improve accessibility and affordability. Accessibility and affordability of various study areas has also been identified as a factor that can attract international students to study in a country (Mpinganjira, 2010; Alam, 2009; Mazzarol and Sonter, 2002).

### ***Experts in South Africa***

Majority of respondents (95%) mentioned that there are experts in various fields of study in South Africa, and this was a benefit of studying in this country. This may be a different situation with Zimbabwe in the last few years. Zimbabwe has been affected by the economic situation causing many experts to search for the so called greener pastures elsewhere. The availability of experts makes South African qualifications respected internationally which may also be a benefit as mentioned by the respondents.

According to Mpinganjira (2009), Cubillo (2006) and Yang (2007), the availability of experts in a country improves the perceived quality of the country's qualifications and also the employability of the qualifications. This can be seen as a benefit by international students, hence attract them. The factors identified by respondents as the benefits are in line with the findings of Oppen et al. (1990); Daly and Baker (2005). These researchers found positive changes in students' experiences as a result of studying in another country. From their studies, it is clear that students benefit from studying outside their home countries.

### ***Costs to students***

Students do not only look at the benefits of higher education in the future. They also take into consideration the circumstances in which they will study (Carla et al., 2004). The costs of studying in South Africa to international students include both financial and social

costs (Mpinganjira, 2010). Financial related costs include tuition, living expenses and so on. Zimbabwean students studying in South Africa identify social costs of studying in South Africa as challenges. The social costs raised by students include crime, discrimination and the longer distance from families. The costs of studying in South Africa as identified by the respondents include costs incurred in home countries in trying to acquire a study permit at the South African embassy. Accommodation, transport and medical insurance are other costs highlighted by the international students.

### ***Acquiring a study permit***

All of the respondents (100%) mentioned that acquiring a study permit to study in South Africa is a cost. This involves locating and visiting the South African embassy in the home country. To international students, acquiring a study permit does not only cost money for it also requires time and effort to apply and acquire it.

### ***Medical insurance***

Before one can be allowed to study in South Africa, the home affairs need to be assured that the student has medical insurance. Medical insurance has become one of the pre-requisites for international students to acquire or extend study permits. This was also mentioned by all (100%) of the respondents.

The South African Home Affairs Department requires that foreign students studying in the country acquire a valid study permit, but for one to acquire a study permit, proof of medical insurance is needed. This makes the costs of acquiring a study permit and medical insurance unavoidable and compulsory to international students.

### ***Travel***

International students travel from their home countries to study in South Africa. Travelling by any form of transport (road, air or rail) cost significant amounts of money.

### ***Crime***

More than 60% of international students mentioned crime as one of the most threatening factors. They consider studying in South Africa as risk taking mainly because of the high crime rate in the country. Cases of robbery and rape in university campuses make crime a real cost to be considered by international students before they enrol.

Cubillo et al. (2006) also noted that prospective students consider various aspects related to living in the host country including issues of safety and quality of life.

### **Discrimination**

Discrimination among students and by staff members was also said to be a challenge faced by international students. There are still activities that cannot be done by international students alone. Real cases of xenophobia were mentioned by 35% of the respondents as another threat or cost of studying in South Africa.

### **Distance from family**

Studying in a foreign country can guarantee a longer distance from other family members. This also comes with the cost associated with communicating with people outside the country. To many students, being far from family is a costly decision to make. This was raised by close to 50% of the respondents as a cost or challenge.

### **Sacrifice jobs**

Studying at tertiary level can mean that students may have sacrificed other opportunities. The opportunities sacrificed may include jobs in their home countries. Almost 15% of the respondents indicated that they had the option to choose between proceeding with studies and working on a fulltime basis in their home countries.

### **Limited funding opportunities**

Although, there are funding organisations at both undergraduate and post graduate level in South Africa, not all of these organisations offer bursaries or scholarships to both South African and non-South African students. This is seen by most (80%) of the international students as a disadvantage of studying in South Africa.

### **Accommodation and limited access to other resources**

Most universities in South Africa do not have enough residence to accommodate all their registered students. Although in some cases preference is said to be given to international students, not all international students find accommodation in university residences. Thirty-three percent of the respondents failed to access university accommodation. Shortages of accommodation can also

spark issues of xenophobia and pressure on resources with local students. It is shortage of accommodation that can be said to be exposing other students (those who will stay outside university premises) to risks like robbery, rape and so on for they end up resorting to low cost accommodation where security will also be compromised.

## **DISCUSSION**

The main findings of this study were:

- (i) Studying in another country does not only have costs, there are also benefits associated with it. This conclusion was based on the fact that not only costs were mentioned by international students in South Africa. Respondents also mentioned some benefits; this therefore means that, in as much as there are costs of studying in another country, there are also benefits that are enjoyed by international students. Content analysis helped the researcher to identify both costs and benefits to international students.
- (ii) To Zimbabwean students, the benefits of studying in South Africa outweigh the costs. This conclusion was reached after testing the null hypothesis as stated below:

*H<sub>0</sub>: The costs of studying in South Africa outweigh the benefits to Zimbabwean students.*

A chi-square test of association was performed and a probability value of 0.017 was obtained. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, it therefore means that we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that to Zimbabwean students, the benefits of studying in South Africa outweigh the costs and Zimbabwean students are most likely to choose studying in South Africa than in their home country.

(iii) It is not only the host country that benefit from international students, the sending country and the students themselves can as well benefit from international education. Although the host country earns revenue through charging for international education, the sending country also benefits. The benefits to the sending country include skills gain and a reduction on the pressure on educational resources.

(iv) There are various factors that motivate students to study in another country. These were identified by the respondents and they include the geographic location of the host country, economic opportunities and employability of the qualifications to be earned. The cost of living is also another important factor identified.

(v) There are still issues of discrimination and xenophobia Among African students. These were mentioned and described by the respondents.

(vi) High crime rate in South Africa is a threat to international education.

(vii) Accommodation is also a challenge to international students. In some cases they have to stay outside university residences and this exposes them to other risks.

(viii) Acquiring or extending a study permit is still a challenge to international students. There are just too many procedures to be followed and it costs money, time and effort.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested:

(1) South African Universities need to come up with strategies to reduce crime against international students in the republic and also on University campuses.

(2) Universities need to market themselves outside the country if they are to attract more of international students.

(3) The South African government should revise the requirements for one to acquire and extend a study visa. There are other charges that are considered by students as unnecessary.

(4) Education on tolerance and respect of people may play a critical role in reducing the problem of discrimination and xenophobia.

(5) International students should be given bursaries or at least research fund if their work can contribute positively to the development of the nation or the continent.

(6) South Africa should take international education as a service. International students should be treated as important customers.

(7) It is important for students to assess costs and benefits of studying in another country before they make such a decision.

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