

Perceptions of International Students on the Challenges of Diversity Management at a South African University

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Abstract

Between the years 2009 and 2010, an average of approximately 5400 applications were received at the University of KwaZulu-Natal from international students (Division of Management Information 2010). Knowledge of international students is essential to higher education institutions. It can be said that international students have become a vibrant part of the diversity in South Africa's education sector and provide immense benefits to our economy, educational institutions, local students and educators. However, there exists a paucity of research on the post-choice perceptions of international students. The purpose of the study was to assess the post-choice perceptions of international students at UKZN, with special references to diversity challenges. A cross-sectional/survey design using questionnaires, with both descriptive and analytical components was employed. The researcher randomly selected 300 students from an updated listing of the registered international students chosen by the generation of random numbers to achieve the objectives of the study. The researcher surveyed the 300 students which were easiest to get a hold of who were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. The responses of 280 international students were received and analysed. All data was processed and analysed using the SPSS version 15.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago,

Illinois, USA). For all statistical comparisons, the 5% significance level (two-tail) was used. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The identified diversity challenges experienced by international students at higher education institutions were found to be: language and communication; social interaction across race/ethnicity; discrimination; Pedagogical approaches; finances; interracial conflict/tension; curriculum; assessment methods; lifestyle adjustment; campus services and facilities; classroom diversity; staff interaction and lastly, campus administration and policies. The results of this study established that financial issues (insufficient financial aid and part-time/casual jobs); a lack of platforms for social and interracial mixing; insufficient campus residency; and the unpreparedness of host families on arrival are the predominant diversity challenges experienced by international students at UKZN. Therefore, the writer attempted to provide recommendations from the results and findings to ensure a truly diverse and united university, some of which are prioritising racial cohesion and inter-racial activity at UKZN, and looking into providing opportunities/assistance to secure casual/part-time jobs at university for international students.

Keywords: International students, Higher Education, University, Culture, Diversity.

Introduction

International students represent an increasing emerging group of students at all major higher education institutions around the world. This can be attributed, in part, to the rapid globalisation trends over the past decade, and the growing desire of students to maximise the experience of their higher education and training. The growing appeal of international study is a now well documented phenomenon, and South Africa's place on the international map of possible destinations is still poorly understood. More importantly, there exists a paucity of information of the experiences and challenges of international students who have studied here or who are currently studying here.

Information on international students, their backgrounds, expectations, and perceptions is essential to higher education institutions.

Their expectations and perceptions are constantly changing as the environment, the demands of society and the economy evolve. Therefore, it is important for universities to keep abreast with international students to ensure that all expectations of international students are being met and that all the universities' goals relating to internationalization (i.e. redesigning the curricula, promoting internationalization and forging strategic partnerships) are achieved.

On a global scale, people, technology and ideas are moving steadily across borders at increasing rates. One of the most important changes is that international students are becoming more interested in learning new languages, participating in cross-cultural interactions and adapting their skills to various situations. However, the challenge is for higher education institutions to meet the expectations of international students faced in a globalised education market (educational and non-educational services) and to coordinate these multiple efforts so they have a better impact on all students, as well as the institution.

Being part of a widely diverse environment can assist international students' personal development and influence their campus involvements and activities. It was stated by Milem, Chang and Antonio (2005:5) that high levels of interracial interaction between students can be linked to a set of institutional practices and supportive campus climate which will in turn allow students to broaden their knowledge and acceptance of students from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Therefore, this study aims to assess the post-choice perceptions of international students at UKZN, with special references to diversity challenges and to offer recommendations for an improved learning institution. The information gathered will be useful to higher education institutions in offering a conceptual plan of best practices that contribute to accommodating and maximizing benefits for international students with regards to diversity management.

International Students

The Institute of International Education (2004:7) suggests a possible definition of an international student is an individual who has relocated to another country mainly for study purposes- however it must be noted that

there are various kinds of international students which may include students undertaking distance learning programmes by an institution in another country or students registered in branch programmes facilitated by faculty from another country. Sekuler and Blake (2002) as cited by Mohammed (2009:7) note that studying and analyzing the background of people, how they perceive diversity and what they expect in terms of diversity helps in exploring their viewpoints about the multiplicity of cultures as well as the gain of unity. They further mention that studying perception can enable leaders to create strategies that ensure optimal perceptual outcomes.

South Africa is said to be emerging as one of the world's most popular study destinations. This is demonstrated in the rapidly increasing number of international students. According to the provisional Department of Education figures, as stated in the Higher Education South Africa booklet, since 1994, there has been a remarkable increase in international students from 12600 to over 64000 in 2008. This is almost 8% of a total of 800 000 students at the country's 23 public universities. Therefore, it is not unexpected that 71% of international students are from neighbouring SADC countries where English is commonly spoken – 45718 in 2008, along with 15% from the rest of Africa, and 11% from other continents.

Due to the use of English as the main language of instruction, the close proximity to most sub-Saharan African countries, reasonable fees and a lower cost of living, South Africa has become an exciting study destination. South Africa also boasts accessible and internationally recognized qualifications with a large higher education sector that is becoming a leader for high quality tertiary education relevant to the demands of a globalizing world (Yes-Asia Consultation 2001).

According to the University of KwaZulu-Natal Strategic Plan (2007-2016: 7) the university mission is as follows, 'A truly South African university that is academically excellent, innovative in research, and critically engaged with society'.

According to the UKZN Division of Management Information (2010), the number of international students has been consistent over the past five years until 2010 when it dropped to 5%.

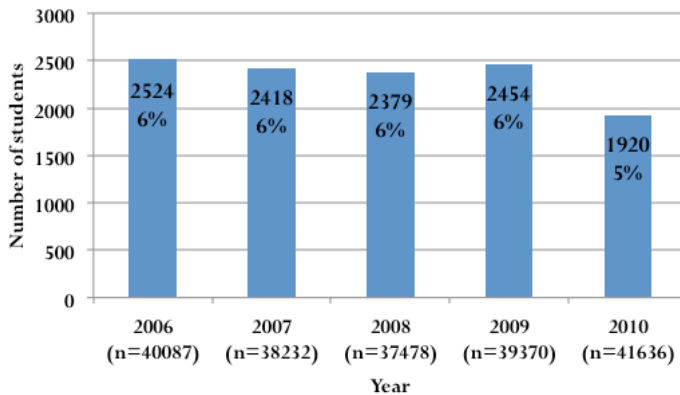


Figure 1: International Student Enrolments at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for 2006 – 2010 Source: Division of Management Information (2010)

According to the Division of Management Information (2010), international students attending UKZN represent over 100 countries worldwide and currently, only 640 out of 1 920 have English as their home language.

According to Arambewela and Hall (2009:12) some factors that affect the perceptions, choice of study destination and satisfaction of international students are:

- **Education:** The education construct highlights the fact that feedback from lecturers, good access to lecturers and quality of teaching are perceived to be the most important variables influencing student satisfaction.
- **Social:** The counselling services, social activities, close working relationships with other students and international orientation programs are considered most important variables within the social construct that influence student satisfaction.
- **Technology:** High expectations are formed by students, given the promises made by universities through their promotional material

and local agents or consultants in regard to the availability of basic facilities such as computer equipment.

- **Economic:** Variables such as casual jobs, migration opportunities, fees and the cost of living are considered within the economic construct.
- **Accommodation:** It was found that international students expect easily available student accommodation at a reasonable cost by universities or by private agencies which meet their minimum standards of comfort and conducive learning environments.
- **Safety:** International students expect universities to take sufficient safety and security precautions as potential students and their families are becoming more critical when choosing their educational institutions and lastly,
- **Prestige and image:** A high international image and the prestige of a university are attractive to students as it is expected that such image and prestige would create better career opportunities for them. These factors should be well addressed by a university as many challenges may arise for international students from these factors.

The following findings have been noted as challenges experienced by international students at higher education institutions:

- **Language and Communication-** Language limitations may make it difficult for international students to understand what is expected of them by lecturers and to participate in class discussions (Trigwell & Shale 2004:13). They go on to say that it is expected for instructors to deliver content by using use suitable language as the medium. It was said by Cross (2004:86) that the workload burden of foreign students could be indirectly increased by language difficulties. A key issue with language is the challenges that may arise by lecturers' language types and genres i.e. unfamiliar concepts, acronyms (Errey 1994 as cited in Ryan & Hellmundt 2003:11).
- **Social interaction across race/ethnicity-** It was said when forming social networks in a foreign country with diverse races and cultures, international students may feel helpless (Krause 2005). Ryan *et al.*

(2003:12) went on to say that establishing friendships in their new environment may be a challenge and that some tend to only socialize with other students from their home country.

- **Discrimination**

Kossek, Lobel and Brown (1996: 167) state that a common barrier to international students in a foreign institution is discrimination- this is another factor that may occur on various levels between students, staff, faculty etc i.e. gender, cultural, racial, sexual. Sadri and Tran (2002: 234) also state that this can cause high levels of alienation, dissatisfaction and exclusion.

- **Pedagogical Approaches**

According to the work of Errey (1994) as cited in Ryan *et al.* (2003:10) sources of difficulties posed for international students may be through the traditional question-answer conventions between teachers and students; the mismatch between the lecturer's teaching style and the student's learning style or the appropriateness of the curriculum to international students. Davis (1993:22) states that each individual looks at the world differently and the approaches in which each student learns may be influenced by the way their unique, individual personality perceives the world.

- **Finances**

Another major challenge facing international students is financial pressure, especially the students who do not receive financial aid and have costs such as living expenses, textbooks and tuitions (Veloutsou *et al.* 2004:27). They went on to state that the exchange rate between currencies could be high for certain international students coming from developing countries.

- **Interracial Conflict/Tension**

The racially and ethnically diverse institution can create tension, isolation, and negativity if not properly managed. By itself the diverse university cannot produce the positive results of which it is capable (Milem *et al.* 2005:22). A study was conducted in USA by Hurtado (1992). She states that the research literature suggests that instances of overt racial conflict should not be seen as isolated incidents or an abnormality but should be viewed as

an indicator of a more general difficulty of unsettled racial matters in universities and in society as a whole.

- **Curriculum**

Ryan *et al.* (2003:16) argues that a source of difficulty can be the appropriateness of the curriculum to international students. Schneider (1990:18) also states that in the presence of a diverse student body, disequilibrium as well as a climate of campus exclusion may be caused by a lack of diverse perspectives in the curriculum.

- **Assessment Methods**

Brown (2001:7) mentions that fairly assessing a diverse mix of students is integral in higher education. Feedback and assessment are both central components of learning and methods in both can pose problems for international students unfamiliar to the university system. Generally speaking, larger classes mean a more diverse and complex student mix. Spack (1997:9) states that, 'It is useful where possible to develop student skills and understanding related to the assessment requirements prior to their undertaking assessment tasks in order to lessen the marking workload associated with poor quality submissions'.

- **Lifestyle Adjustment**

Existing research has highlighted that the adjustment of international students is influenced by their assimilation of a country's culture which poses as a significant factor. Gordon (1964) as cited in Doble and Supriya (2011:27) asserts that, 'an immigrant is assimilated as soon as he has shown that he can get on in the country; that is, the immigrant has adapted to the lifestyle and cultural conditions of the host country. This includes the development of a basic proficiency in the language of the host country as well as a basic level of knowledge of native customs and values'.

- **Campus Services and Facilities**

The expectations of international students change as the economy and globalised requirements change. They often have basic expectations of facilities and campus services. A study done by Ward and Masgoret (2004:22) says that international students expect to have necessary services

and facilities available to them i.e. computing services, counseling, accommodation services, library services, international student office, student orientation services, sports and recreational facilities, health services, clubs and societies, financial advice services and student association to name a few.

- **Classroom Diversity**

It can be said that a diverse classroom of international students provides opportunities for learning about other cultures, values and viewpoints, and leads to a better democratic education. However, Brown and Dobbins (2004: 158) as cited in Morris (2004:31), find that ‘contexts in which stereotypes are salient may detrimentally affect the performance of students of colour as well as their expectations for their experience in the classroom’.

- **Staff Interaction**

In a tertiary institution, developing a suitable environment where students are able to interact with their lecturers is imperative. It is also useful to appoint volunteers from senior students to be hosts of the new international students who enter the university Hellsten and Prescott (2004:32). Gundara (2000:25) argues that lecturers are responsible for not only mentoring and teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds but also have the responsibility to educate these students on how to live in a society of diverse cultures.

- **Campus Administration and Policies**

In the case of campus policies, Milem *et al.* (2005:17) said that an institution’s commitment to diversity should permeate policy in all areas of institutional life.

Campus administration should encompass well-organized processes and diversity enriched systems to assist the enrollment of international students as well as the transfer of course credits as it was stated by Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006:11) that these processes are the first impression students acquire of the institution which often influences their expectations and attitude towards the institution upon arrival. A generic model for campus diversity has been used in this study and is presented.

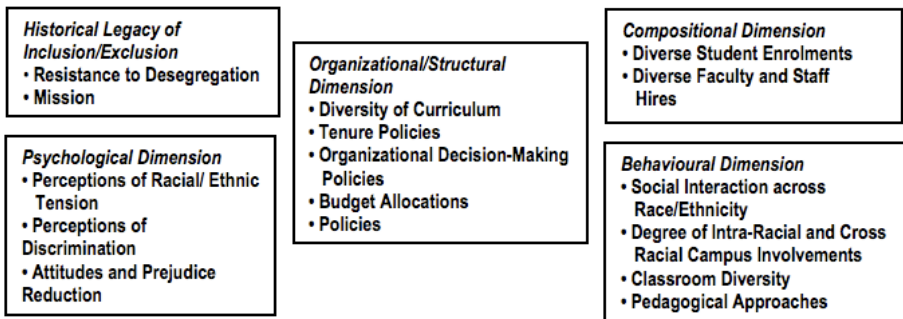


Figure 2: A Generic Campus Diversity Model for Universities. Source: Hurtado and colleagues (1998; 1999) as cited in Milem *et al.* (2005:16)

Diversity Management

South African universities are faced with a challenge of adapting educational and non-educational factors to the highly diverse population of international students. According to Cross (2004:392) in Higher Education settings diversity means, ‘Opening up the university to different people, all interested in studying at this university. It means that all staff should be able to meet the needs of each individual. It means accommodating as many people as possible with their differences. It means wishing to know about the other. It means different things to different institutions’.

Purposes of Managing Diversity in Higher Education

Managing diversity can be a multidimensional management approach achieved by understanding the perceptions of diversity. However, it is essential for the purpose of this study to understand why diversity is so important at university and what benefits it creates for the international student. Eight reasons are offered by Thompson and Cuseo (2009:4):

1. ‘Diversity *expands worldliness*’. It is said that campus may be the first time one has the opportunity to have proper interaction with a diverse group of people. In many cases, whether one tries or not, groups of people are often segregated from other groups, be it

churches, schools, residential areas etc. However, campus offers people the opportunity to connect with various groups of people

2. ‘Diversity *enhances social development*’. In the event that an individual is given the chance to interact with various groups of people, it offers the opportunity to broaden one’s social horizons by expanding the pool of people with whom one can associate and develop relationships. This also offers one stimulating and interesting conversations with people who are different to them
3. ‘Diversity *prepares students for future career success*’. According to Jayakumar (2008:618), major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today’s increasingly global market place can only be developed from college through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas and viewpoints. In other words, the importance of managing diversity is crucial in higher education in such a way that it prepares students for the workplace. A study by Bikson and Law (1994:19) shows that colleges in the US are failing to develop students who can work effectively with individuals whose norms, preferences, beliefs, styles and values are different from their own.
4. ‘Diversity *prepares students for work in a global society*’. It is a certainty that no matter what job one gets into, or what profession one enters, they will encounter working with clients, customers, coworkers, employees and employers from diverse backgrounds-worldwide. Jayakumar (2008:620) stated that racial and ethnic diversity is associated with ‘active thinking skills, intellectual engagement and motivation, and variety of academic skills’. In addition, many students support the fact that managing cultural diversity has a positive impact on intellectual and social skills, racial and ethnic diversity is also associated with growth in leadership skills, cultural awareness and cross-racial understanding (Astin 1993:189). Students believe that these benefits are gained when educated in a culturally diverse environment and promotes personal growth.

5. 'Interactions with people different from ourselves *increase our knowledge base*'. Experience and research have often indicated that people learn more from people who are different to them opposed to people who are similar. This can be thought of as- when a person encounters new knowledge or material, they 'think harder', therefore, they will do the same when they meet and interact with diverse people. Bikson and Law (1994:20) confirm this point by stating that the most is learnt from those whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are different from our own, and these lessons can be taught best in a richly diverse intellectual and social environment.
6. 'Diversity *promotes creative thinking*'. Having a multi-perspective mind has advantage. Diversity contributes to expanding one's capacity for viewing problems or issues from multiple angles and vantage points. 'These diverse vantage points work to your advantage when you encounter new problems in different contexts and situations. Rather than viewing the world through a single-focus lens, you are able to expand your views and consider multiple options when making decisions and weighing issues of, for example, morality and ethics' (Thompson & Cuseo 2009:23).
7. 'Diversity *enhances self-awareness*'. People with different experiences and backgrounds offer more to learn from and can sharpen one's self-insight and self-knowledge by comparing and contrasting their backgrounds and life experiences with the experiences of others. When one is more self-aware, they are more capable of making well thought out and informed decisions about their professional and academic future.
8. 'Diversity *enriches the multiple perspectives* developed by a liberal arts education'. It is known that people often become self-indulged and tend to move away from an afro-centric approach to life. However, the power of a general education is magnified by diversity by contributing to the liberation of people. When a person moves beyond themselves, they are able to gain a panoramic angle of the

surrounding world and a more complete view of where and how they fit in.

Diversity and Higher Education

‘Over the course of three and a half decades, the concept of diversity and its educational agenda have evolved to encompass a broad set of purposes, issues, and initiatives on college campuses’ (Milem *et al.* 2005:23). Higher Education should uphold a multifocal approach that incorporates the success of underrepresented students, a platform for change and climate, research and educational requirements that teaching all students from a diverse society involves, and lastly institutional viability and vitality. Some of the challenges of Diversity in Higher Education are outlined below.

Smith (1995:12) identified four distinct challenges of diversity in the context of Higher Education. Utilizing this framework, Table 1 depicts the problems and opportunities associated with each of the various challenges.

Representation focuses on the presence or absence of particular groups in the college campus and seeks ways to increase their number. This challenge is the outcome of the accumulated distortions of the past.

The second challenge, campus climate, identifies the fundamental connections between educational attainment and institutional environment, and aims to change those aspects of campus climate that prove inappropriate for a particular group of students. Here, the challenge is largely due to the common stereotypes and prejudices. Smith (1995:12) suggests that merely making provisions to accommodate disadvantaged students will not suffice and that diversity-positive initiatives should be considered for creating a supportive climate, giving disadvantaged students a feeling of empowerment and meaning.

The third challenge, educational mission, conveys the disparity in the performances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are under- or unprepared specifically with deplorable schooling. It was said by Smith (1995:13) that a realization of all students benefiting from an education that promotes the understanding and capability for a multi-perspective, multi-racial and multi-gendered world is a challenge.

The fourth challenge as stated by Smith (1995:14) is transformation and joins all other dimensions of diversity in a primary review of the university/ educational institutions organizing conjectures- educational, intellectual, institutional and societal. The dilemma of discrimination and widespread inequality needs to be solved with involvement of the community and social sensitive community for improved integration.

Table 1: A Framework for Management of Diversity Source: Smith (1995:14)

PROBLEMS	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES
Accumulated distortions of the past	Representation	Reservation Positive discrimination Quota
Prejudice and Stereotype	Campus climate	Diversity positive initiatives Warm and supportive Empowerment
Disparity in performance	Educational mission	Reform curriculum Remedial education Provide life skills
Inequality and discrimination	Transformation	Social sensitivity Involvement of community Integration

Diversity at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

South Africa has an extensive Higher Education sector of which UKZN is a member. It consists of, ‘21 Universities, 15 Universities of Technology, 50 Teacher Training Colleges and scores of Agricultural and Nursing Colleges’ (UKZNTOUCH 2010:5). In addition, there is a growing private tertiary sector, whose institutions range from Colleges to Universities. The research output generated by the 12 500 full time academics and a similar number of

researchers working for research councils, institutes and companies, is the biggest in Africa - competing with the best in many developed countries.

UKZN is ranked as one of the top ten universities in South Africa. An independent project known as the Google College Rankings ranks universities and colleges around the world using Google. According to the Google College Rankings (2010), the University of KwaZulu-Natal ranks seventh in the country. According to the UKZN website, the university is committed to academic excellence and advances knowledge through globally competitive teaching, learning, scholarship, research, innovation and academic freedom. UKZN has nearly 400 000 students and is a truly South African university that reflects the diverse society in which it is situated. UKZN embraces internationalisation and diversity as a vital element of its goals and values.

University Goals

According to the *University of KwaZulu-Natal Strategic Plan (2007-2016: 12)* the University will strive for African-Led Globalization by:

- **Redesigning the curricula**

‘Faculties and Schools will design their curricula to incorporate indigenous and local knowledge and knowledge systems as far as possible’.

- **Promoting internationalization**

‘The University will support carefully selected student exchange programmes that bring students from other countries to the University and further expand our students’ international opportunities, particularly exposure to Africa, to enrich the learning experience for all’.

- **Forging strategic partnerships**

‘Strategic partnerships at the continental and global levels are critical in placing UKZN’s African scholarship in the wider international arena and in taking on some of the challenges of producing African scholarship’.

Research Methodology

The objectives of this study is to identify the challenges regarding diversity experienced by international students at higher education institutions; assess

the perceptions of international students regarding which of these challenges are the most predominant at UKZN and lastly, make recommendations accordingly to improve the perceptions and experiences of international students regarding diversity at UKZN.

Study design and sampling: In this study, the questionnaire survey was used making it impractical to question all 1920 international students in the population. Therefore, it was necessary to draw a sample. The researcher distributed questionnaires to the International Students Office at each of the five campuses making up UKZN. The Division of Management Information provided the researcher with an updated listing of enrolled international students at UKZN. International students were randomly chosen by the generation of random numbers to achieve the objectives of the study. They were then emailed and invited to participate in the study by picking up and returning the questionnaire from the International Students Office.

Statistical analysis: All statistical analysis has been conducted using SPSS version 15.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA). For all statistical comparisons, the 5% significance level has been used.

Results

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, with 280 completed questionnaires returned. All questionnaires were unspoilt and adequate for analysis. The response rates were consistently high across all campuses of the University (88 – 97%).

Table 2: Dispatched Questionnaires by Campus and Received Responses

Campus	Number distributed	Responses	%
Howard College	110	105	95
Edgewood	50	44	88

Westville	65	63	97
PMB	45	40	89
Medical School	30	28	93
Total	300	280	93

Table 3: Demographic profile of respondents

Characteristics	International Students	
	Count	%
Gender:		
Male	152	54.3%
Female	128	45.7%
Age in years:		
17-19	40	14.3%
20-25	157	56.1%
26-30	52	18.6%
31-35	21	7.5%
>35	10	3.6%
Race group:		
African	156	55.7%
Indian/Asian	30	10.7%
White	70	25%
Other	24	8.6%
Level of Study:		
Undergraduate	130	46.4%
Honours	74	26.4%
Masters	53	18.9%
Doctorate	17	6.1%
Post-doctorate	6	2.1%
Is English your native language?		
Yes	138	49.3%
No	142	50.7%

The results reflect 54.3% of the respondents were male and 45.7% of the respondents were female. The majority of the respondents were under the age of 25 (70.4%). The majority of the respondents were African (55.7%) followed by White (25%) which was followed by Indian (10.7%). Lastly, the smallest number of respondents was of 'other' unspecified race groups (8.6%). Nearly half (46.4%) of the international students were pursuing their undergraduate education. Just over half (50.7%) of students were not first language English speakers.

Table 4: Perceptions of international students on diversity challenges at UKZN (n=280).

Item	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
Unfamiliar language is used by lecturers	81.1%	1.4%	17.5%
Insufficient language courses available	61.8%	11.4%	26.8%
Assessment methods are unsuitable	64.3%	8.2%	27.5%
Group work is difficult	66%	4.3%	29.7%
Financial aid is not easily accessible	16.4%	25.7%	57.9%
University fees are less affordable than home	59.2%	5.5%	35.3%
Insufficient opportunities for casual work	6.7%	37.9%	55.4%
Hosts are inadequately prepared	16.1%	12.5%	71.4%
Insufficient accommodation available	27.5%	11.4%	61.1%
Residence is not a conducive learning environment	19.6%	50%	30.4%
Security in inadequate	69.7%	7.5%	22.8%
Computer laboratories are inadequate	75%	1.4%	23.6%

Limited opportunities for inter-racial activities	19%	10.3%	70.7%
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Discussion and Recommendations

The first objective of the study was to identify the challenges regarding diversity experienced by international students at higher education institutions, which was achieved earlier in the paper. The findings of this study help identify the perceptions of key challenges that students face at one of the largest universities in the country, as well highlights where these students are not dissatisfied. The anonymity of this survey, and the large number of international students in this study assisted in providing an accurate reflection of their experience. The second objective of the study was to assess the perceptions of international students regarding which of these challenges are the most predominant at UKZN. The predominant challenges identified by international students were:

- 1) Poor accessibility of financial aid
- 2) Difficulty in securing casual employment
- 3) The perceived unpreparedness of host families
- 4) Insufficiency of accommodation, and
- 5) The limited opportunity for inter-racial activities

Surprisingly, issues pertaining to language difficulties, teaching and assessment methods, and safety were not perceived as challenges by the majority of international students surveyed.

International students' debt can grow immensely due to increases in various education-related costs, higher tuition, and changes in the availability of financial aid. UKZN Central Students' Representative Council President (2009) Ms Bavelile Hlongwa as cited in the UKZNTOUCH Magazine by Maharaj (2010:22) believes Government should look at the possibility of freeing up funding from other State departments and diverting it to Higher Education Institutions. This is convergent with the results which indicate the majority of respondents agree that as an international student at UKZN, financial aid is not easily accessible.

Financial restrictions make it difficult for international students to earn money while studying and leave them with few feasible opportunities. According to Seow (2005:34) Australia allows international students to work up to 20 hours a week and almost all international students take advantage of this facility. Arambewela *et al.* (2009:11) found that a concern for students is the lack of opportunities to obtain a casual/ part-time job on campus. This study indicates a convergence as the majority of respondents agreed to there being insufficient opportunities to obtain part-time/casual jobs for international at UKZN.

Ward and Masgoret (2004:22) state that international students expect to have necessary services and facilities available to them such as accommodation. They go on to say that a clear expectation regarding campus residence should be created for these students as arriving in a foreign country with no accommodation is unacceptable. Further to this, Seow (2005:45) states that host families should receive training and prepare for international students as they play a vital role and influence in their lives. Failure to do so may result in low confidence levels of international students and may create the feeling of an unsupportive environment for them. The majority of international students at UKZN indicated insufficient accommodation and unpreparedness of host families as challenges at UKZN.

It was said when forming social networks in a foreign country with diverse races and cultures, international students may feel helpless (Kossek *et al.* 1996:123). Racial/ethnic student organizations provide students with opportunities for identity development, cross-cultural learning, and peer support. Social facilitates including unions and catering facilities, religious and sports clubs, and societies of special interest can accommodate international students from different cultures (Ward *et al.* 2004:12). It can be seen that 70.7% of respondents indicated limited opportunities for inter-racial interaction at UKZN.

The last objective of the study was to make recommendations accordingly to improve the perceptions and experiences of international students regarding diversity at UKZN which will now be addressed. The study is able to recommend that:

- Financial aid has been highlighted as a challenge to international students, especially to students from the SADC regions. While financial

resources remain scarce for all students of higher education in South Africa, the increasing appeal of the country as a site for higher education necessitates some investigation into possible methods of assisting foreign students financially. Existing policies should also be clear on what kind of financial assistance foreign students can expect, and the minimum financial resources they should be required to have in order to live and study in South Africa.

- The lack of opportunities for casual work may be viewed as symptomatic of the broader problem of unemployment and lack of employment opportunities facing South Africa at large. However, the unique financial vulnerabilities of international students does require that opportunities be created or that assistance be available to secure such opportunities. The possibility of extending graduate assistant opportunities to international students and of broadening casual employment at the university in a directed effort to help support these students must be pursued.
- One of the key reasons cited for the growing popularity of South Africa as an international student choice is the racial and cultural diversity of the country. It is therefore unacceptable that international students report dissatisfaction with the limited opportunity for inter-racial activities. In response to this, and in keeping with a broader socio-ethical imperative, universities must prioritize racial cohesion and inter-racial activity.
- Issues pertaining to the availability of sufficient accommodation may also allude to the general difficulty of provision of accommodation to university students. This can be addressed by advising international students on the availability of accommodation before they arrive in South Africa, or by clearly outlining a reasonable expectation regarding the provision or assistance in securing accommodation. In addition, where institutions are involved in the use of host families, there exists an obligation on such institutions to ensure the adequate training and education of these households. The use of an objective measure for the acceptability and preparedness of such families must be in place, and exit interviews from hosted students may be used a feedback mechanism.

While the study was limited to the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and findings may not be generalised to other institutions, the discussion and recommendations may serve to inform the international student offices of any higher education institution in the country. Further research could gainfully be directed towards exploring the perceptions of international students at other Higher Education Institutions around KwaZulu-Natal and in the rest of the country.

Conclusion

The investigation is exploratory and has attempted to identify the diversity challenges international students experience at higher education institutions, assess the perceptions of international students regarding which of these challenges are the most experienced at UKZN, and lastly, make recommendations accordingly to improve the perceptions and experiences of international students. The findings of this study corroborate that diversity management is essential to international students in higher education institutions. The main diversity challenges identified in this higher education institution were social interaction across race/ethnicity; finances; and lifestyle adjustment.

The information and recommendations of this study will be useful to UKZN on improving diversity management in certain areas that affect international students negatively. It will also be useful to all higher education institutions in accommodating and maximizing benefits for international students with regards to diversity management. The perceptions of international students at UKZN suggest that diversity is an important issue in contemporary management and that there is still much work to be done in the way of changing perceptions, attitudes and behaviours before diversity can be effectively managed.

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