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INTERNATIONAL & COMPARATIVE EDUCATION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

A critical examination of factors influencing international students' choice to study in Ghanaian higher educational institutions

Gifty Oforiwaa Gyamera^{1*} and William Asare²

Abstract: Recently, many Ghanaian universities have made considerable efforts to reposition themselves in the global space to attract international students. Although there have been some gains, the universities continue to attract a relatively lower number of students. We argue the need to critically examine the factors which motivate international students' choice of study destinations to enhance the relevant approach and experience for them. Utilising a postcolonial approach and drawing on data from two Ghanaian institutions, this paper critically examines international students' motivation to study in Ghana. The findings indicate that colonial legacies continue to characterise international students' motivations. There is a need for institutions to create their niche and also provide relevant socio-cultural space to enhance students' experiences. Global universities should cast off their negative perceptions of African universities and should provide greater and broader opportunities for their students to engage with these universities in their study-abroad programmes.

Subjects: Educational Research; Higher Education; International & Comparative Education

Keywords: international student mobility; globalisation; motivation; postcolonialism; interculturalism

1. Introduction

International student recruitment has emerged as a policy priority in contemporary universities. In 2018, more than 5.6 million students globally were studying abroad (OECD, 2020), up from two million in 2000. The OECD predicts that, by 2025, eight million students will be studying abroad.

Similar to global trends, many Ghanaian universities have made considerable efforts to reposition themselves in the global space to attract international students. These include developing mission statements, expanding existing programmes, collaborating with "prestigious" universities abroad and utilising international experts' advice (Gyamera, 2015; Gyamera & Burke, 2017). Although there have been some gains (Statista, 2021), the universities continue to attract a relatively lower number of students. For instance, in 2020, as highlighted by the enrolment and graduation statistics of the university of Ghana, only 1.17% of those graduating were international students (institutional website). In 2020, just a little over 547 thousand students were enrolled in higher educational institutions in Ghana (Statista, 2021).

The limited number of international students choosing to study in non-OECD countries is highlighted in the global literature and demonstrates that international students' motivations and recruitment cannot be independent of the intersectional influences of historical, geographical, economic, political, and cultural contexts. These factors are particularly influenced by colonial

legacies (Ploner & Nada, 2020). In 2021, international students in the US, UK and Canada were 957, 475; 550, 877; and 323, 157 respectively, whilst international students who studied in Ghana and South Africa were 5, 718 and 36, 050 (UNESCO, 2023)

Historically, many African countries were forcefully invaded in the 17th century, and in 1884–85 during the Berlin Conferences, formally partitioned among European countries, predominantly Britain, France, and Portugal (Gates & Appiah, 2022). This invasion resulted in the colonisation of many Sub-Saharan African countries (Ibid), including Nigeria, Togo, and Ghana, and the subsequent exploitation of their people, land, and resources. The effects on African higher education institutions have been huge. Though various policies, actions and inactions by many African governments could be partially responsible for the deterioration of the universities (Sawyers, 2014), ubiquitous colonial legacies cannot be ignored (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The universities have been ubiquitously characterised by severe economic crises and mis/representations culminating in limited physical and educational resources, limited relevance, overcrowding and inadequate access to international knowledge resources (Sawyers, 2014). They continue to witness incessant strikes and demonstrations which disrupt the academic calendar. For instance, within the last 12 months, there have been a minimum of three strikes in Ghana each lasting for about one month. As we are writing this paper, Ghanaian public universities are on an indefinite strike.

The recent emphasis on globalisation has escalated the plight of these universities. Altbach and Knight define globalisation as “the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement” (2007, p. 290). Though the idea of globalisation is to unify people and places globally (Stiglitz, 2006, p. 7) it has become more skewed towards economic benefits. In higher education, this direction of globalisation, continues to create key competitive challenges for African universities, as they have to compete with Western universities for students. The figures above on student recruitment confirm the limited ability of universities in the Global South to compete with universities in the Global North. The intersected challenges have impacted the universities’ activities, programmes, and sense of confidence and identity, making it difficult to attract international students, particularly from the Global North. It is significant to indicate however that the emphasis on globalisation has also enhanced opportunities for most African universities to be more innovative, improve upon their services, and enhance collaboration and economic opportunities as they compete for international students (Gyamera, 2015).

To enhance universities’ efforts to attract a higher number of international students, we argue the need to critically examine the factors which motivate students’ choice of study destinations. This will help them adopt the relevant approach for their recruitment and develop strategies to enrich their experiences. Utilising a postcolonial approach and drawing on data from two Ghanaian institutions, this paper critically examines factors which influence international students’ choice to study in Ghanaian.

2. International student mobility

There are multiple, interrelated definitions of “international students”. Mainly, International students are those who received their prior education in another country and are not citizens of their current country of study (OECD, 2023).

The OECD (2023) defines international students as: Those who received their prior education in another country and are not residents of their current country of study. When information on international students is not available, foreign students – students who are not citizens of the country in which they study – can be used as a proxy.

This definition captures the most important group of international students: those living in a foreign country for educational purposes (OECD, 2023).

Different types of international students can be identified. Firstly, there is a full degree programme abroad (Knight, 2012). This involves students who enrol and complete a full degree at an

institution in a foreign country. They are awarded their degree by the host institution. There are also those who participate in short-term, study-abroad programmes, as part of the degree programme at their home institution. This is normally for a duration of one semester or one year, and the degree is awarded by the home HEI. There are also cross-border collaborative degree programmes between two or more institutions or providers. Here, students register for an academic programme involving two or more HE institutions or providers working collaboratively to offer a degree programme (Ibid).

There is also the cross-border supply where students stay in their home countries and enrol in courses abroad. E-learning-based distance education programs typically reflect this form of cross-border education. This type of education has been facilitated by exponential technological development which has resulted in the proliferation of online institutions and massive open online courses (MOOCs; Knight, 2019).

3. Motivations and influences of student mobility and colonial implications

There are diverse reasons for prospective students to study abroad and head towards particular destinations. These could be more related to positional and transformative rationales (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007). The positional rationales are more strategic and aim towards professional development. It includes the desire to develop an international career, benefit from lower university fees, learn a new language, or undertake a specific course that is not available at home (Altbach & Engbert, 2014).

The transformative is more personal and includes the desire to seek knowledge, adventure, and excitement, and also to gain independence (Ibid.). These categorisations are overlapping and not too distinctive from each other. Whilst individuals may seek to strategically develop their international career, they may equally seek opportunities for adventure and other social engagements.

Although student mobility has been historical, the recent emphasis on globalisation and associated internationalisation has made it more exponential.

3.1. The concept of globalisation and its impact on student mobility

Globalisation is conceptualized as “the process of strengthening the worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local events are shaped by circumstances at other places in the world” (Giddens, 1990, p. 64). It is a “process that is increasing the flow of people, culture, ideas, values, knowledge, technology, and economy across borders resulting in a more interconnected and interdependent world” (Knight, 2012, p. 45).

Some major questions which underlie this definition about the arguments in the paper is the dominant rationale/s for the flow, whether the “flow” is specifically from a particular direction to another specific direction, or if the “flow” involves an exchange, and/or whether such a “flow” benefits all nations alike. Other questions include whether in the course of flow, as indicated by Nyamnjoh, there are “accelerated closures” and “intensifying reality of borders, divisions and violent strategies” of exclusion as well (Nyamnjoh, 2003, p. 38). In responding to these questions, two aspects of globalisation become relevant. These are Economic globalisation and Cultural globalisation.

Economic globalisation is a process of increased economic integration and inter-dependence of world economies that facilitates the free flow of goods, capital, people, and ideas beyond borders (David, 2014, p. 284). This is linked to neoliberal ideologies which emphasise competition, profits and instrumental reasoning. Globally, international students are now perceived as a source of income not only for universities but to host countries. Whilst universities compete for students to generate revenue, students also choose universities to enhance their career opportunities.

Deriving employability skills has been identified as a key determinant of students' flow (Jones, 2013). Jones distinguishes between employment skills and employability skills. Employment skills refer 'to specific professions for which qualifications and credentials are a key factor' (Ibid. p. 143), whilst employability skills are more generic. It involves personal and interpersonal skills and attributes including empathy, understanding, appreciation and recognition of difference, and team-working. These skills are independent of an individual's field of study but make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. Various studies have confirmed greater connections between international exposure and the development of employability skills (Jones, 2013). It has been argued that employers appreciate these values more than disciplinary-based skills (Ibid).

Such reasoning has also fuelled the desire to attend a world-class institution and the associated prestige of acquiring a foreign degree remains a key motivation for student mobility. Though it has been difficult to define what exactly a world-class university is it has over the years been tied to a Western elite university model- a prestigious research-intensive with a high concentration of talented faculty from the national and international contexts and produces highly intensive research in its partnerships with industry and in the creation of patents. These universities are perceived to function in an environment that nurtures competitiveness, unrestrained scientific inquiry, critical thinking, innovation, and creativity (Ibid). Excellent students from wealthy homes are mostly attracted to these universities. By attending such universities students hope to acquire excellent training, make the right "connections" and attract prestigious career opportunities.

This desire has become more prevalent based on the importance of international ranking systems which now play decisive roles in international education. Most global universities continue to embark on rigorous and committed strategies to position or consolidate themselves in top positions in international rankings to reflect and ascertain their power and prestige. The strategies include the publication of papers in high-ranked journals and the ability to attract top-notch students (Celis & Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2021).

Most universities in the global North such as the USA, the UK and Australia occupy the highest positions in the international rankings, and are the hub of huge and prestigious research funding and attract affluent international students (Ibid). They embark on huge and attractive marketing campaigns and advertisements. Most universities around the world, and particularly universities in countries in developing and emerging economies "can have only a modest aspiration in becoming international" (Ibid, p. 2).

The colonial implications of many of the determinants of student mobility are not far-fetched. Many scholars have criticised this model of the world-class university as a new form of colonialism or academic imperialism. Academic imperialism generates a hegemonic narrative that discriminates against those universities that do not follow this model, (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2022, p. 5).

A subsequent influence of students' motivations and choices of universities is the concept of imaginative geography. When students choose to study abroad, they are influenced by varied perceptions of the place where they wish to study. These perceptions mostly are historically constructed. For instance, historical legacies combined with powerful Western media machinery create distortions and misrepresentations which discourage students from Global North to study in Sub-Saharan Africa. The universities are argued to have fewer resources to provide an international learning experience to their students when compared with wealthy and prestigious universities in the global North. African universities are perceived as limited (Sawyer, 2014) in their ability to offer international students relevant knowledge, cultural diversity, and unique experiences. This is due to the factors explained above including inadequate physical and educational resources, as well as the effects of colonialism which downplayed African

Knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Although many universities are making efforts to improve their institutional rankings, academics in less developed countries are less cited in Western journals (Beigel, 2014). Again this results from the stereotyped perceptions of limited knowledge creation by universities in the Global South, particularly Africa. These confirm and reinforce the notion that knowledge cannot be generated in the African context.

These challenges compel universities in the global South to rigorously and faithfully mimic the programmes and structures of universities in the North. In such situations, students will prefer to go to the “original universities” instead of a ‘camouflage one.

The mobility of international students as a global trend continues to reflect the economic and political interests of supra and wealthy countries and international organisations including the World Bank and the OECD.

Cultural globalisation is another key determinant of international student mobility. It is a “phenomenon by which the experience of everyday life, as influenced by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, reflects a standardization of cultural expressions around the world” (Watson, 2022, para 1). Tong and Cheung conceptualise it as “the process of exporting CIs [cultural identities] to other nations from dominant cultures” (Tong & Cheung, 2011, 58). Again, there is a challenge, as Noddings indicates, of the particular cultures to be adopted. As she emphasized, whilst “some think that there could be—even that there should be a global way of life ... it usually looks suspiciously like their own way” (Ibid, p. 2).

Prospective students are motivated to choose destinations with which they share a common culture, and social relationships. The idea of “likeness” boosts the academic, cultural and socio-economic integration of international students and makes adaptation to the destination institutions easier. Language and physical proximity have therefore emerged as key determinants of student mobility. In this case, the English Language has become very important in determining destinations for study. Many students will choose English-speaking countries. The ability to speak English has therefore become a critical factor in acquiring a prestigious job.

In the Ghanaian context, there have been efforts both at the national and institutional levels to attract international students. However, most of the strategies and policies are embarked on at the institutional level (Gyamera, 2015). These strategies include the development of mission statements to emphasise the position of the universities to deliver world-class and excellent programmes, international collaborations with perceived prestigious universities abroad and the use of foreign experts (Ibid). The universities also engage in direct advertisements in neighbouring countries where the universities attract most of their students. Various programmes have also been introduced to make the curriculum more attractive to international students (Ibid).

The government through the regulatory bodies in Ghana mandate the universities to reserve a 10 per cent quota of total enrolment for all institutions for international students Ministry of Education (2019). The government also encourage institutional cooperation and networking and facilitates the acquisition of visas by foreign students and faculty (Ibid).

4. Negotiating through the inequalities and misrepresentations

It is essential for universities in the Global South to assert their international space and enhance rich international positioning and experiences for students. As asserted by Guzmán-Valenzuela (2022), these colonial forces also offer opportunities for drastic structural changes and transformations. It is key for universities to strive to enrich their international students' experiences.

Whilst employability skills should be an integral aspect of international students' experiences. skills such as recognition and appreciation of diversity, empathy and a sense and team building should be emphasised. These skills also have the potential of offsetting the

postcolonial implications of the economic and instrumental rationales of student mobility. The challenge is that most often local curricula hardly emphasise these skills. The curriculum of the local university should therefore incorporate these skills to also benefit international students.

The universities should create awareness and also challenge the hegemonic narratives of a world-class university. World-class universities should put more emphasis on other values such as social justice and a sense of respect for equity and equality. They should be pragmatic policies and initiatives at various dimensions of the university to create a niche to be attractive to international students. This niche should reflect the African values, knowledge systems, beliefs and idiosyncrasies including curriculum, about indigenous peoples. There should be regional initiatives to augment collaborations in the universities to encourage student exchange. Students should be motivated to study in other developing countries.

One of the three main legs of world-class is the involvement of government (Salmi, 2016). Efforts of various institutions will be fruitless unless they are vigorously supported by the Government which should provide the framework to build leadership and vision that will support an attractive university.

5. Context of institutions in the study

5.1. University A

University A is a large and highly-ranked university in Ghana and the sub-region. It is located in one of the biggest cities in Ghana and has comparatively good infrastructure. It has the vision to become a research-intensive, world-class university.

Over the last two decades, the university has expanded its academic programmes to reflect its vision. Recently, it has aggressively pursued an internationalisation agenda with the focused aim of attracting international students (Gyamera, 2015). It has established several collaborations with universities in Africa, Europe, and North America to facilitate student, faculty, and staff exchange.

5.2. University B

University B is equally a highly recognised University in Ghana and the sub-region. It was mandated at its inception to provide education and training services, particularly in Ghana and the sub-region. Recently, it has expanded its programmes and focuses on attracting students from across the globe.

The university now has a strategic objective to reposition itself toward attaining a 21st-century image, both nationally and globally. It seeks to be a world-class university. To this end, it has prioritised the recruitment of foreign students (ibid.). It has also expanded its programmes and infrastructural base to reflect this new ambition.

6. The methodology

Qualitative methodology frames this research, in the form of case studies of two public universities. This approach enabled the collection of comprehensive and in-depth knowledge and understanding of international students' motivations and experiences of studying at higher educational institutions in Ghana (Silverman, 2011). These two universities were purposively selected based on their mission and vision statements, status, and accessibility to the researchers.

The target population consisted of undergraduate and graduate international students, from both African and non-African countries. In this study, we take international students to include students enrolled in universities who are not citizens of Ghana and pursuing a full degree and/or short-term, one-semester, or year-abroad programs (Knight, 2012). We also looked at both graduate and undergraduate students and those pursuing short-term, one-semester, or year abroad programs.

International students enrol in virtually all programmes, from undergraduate to postgraduate with many in the Humanities, Sciences, and Education. In this study, there was no specific focus on particular programmes because we were interested in identifying and understanding the nuanced motivations and aspirations of students undertaking various programmes in Ghana. Convenience and snowballing sampling techniques were used to select student participants. Although information about students is available in the respective international office, it was difficult getting access to the students. We, therefore, had to involve those who were readily available and willing to participate in the research. The coordinators and programme officers introduced international students to us whilst some students also introduced us to their colleagues. Two coordinators from the international offices of the two universities were also interviewed to ascertain the nature of international students in the universities.

Details of participants are presented below:

Details of student participants

Institution	Number of students	Duration of programme	Age brackets
University A			
Undergraduate			
Canada	2	One year	18–25
USA	8	One year	18–25
Nigeria	6	Four years (Full time)	18–25
Graduate			
Cameroon	1	One-year Masters	25–30
South Africa	1	One-year Masters	25–30
Kenya	1	One-year Masters	25–30
Sierra Leona	1	One-year Masters	25–30
Total	20		
University B			
Undergraduate			
UK	1	One semester	22–25
Spain	3	One semester	19–22
France	1	One semester	19–22
Nigeria	5	Four-year programme	
Graduate			
Liberia	3	One-year masters	25–30
Nigeria	1	One-year masters	25–30
Total	14		

The participants in the study are reflective of the nature of international students in the universities. At University A, the majority of participants were African students, with the bulk of these being Nigerians. The majority of the non-African international students were from the USA and Canada, and all of these were exchange students, who are required to spend only a semester or two at their host universities. All of them were pursuing undergraduate programmes. In contrast, all of those pursuing full-time graduate and undergraduate programmes were from African countries. All the undergraduate African students were Nigerian.

At University B, the majority of non-African students were from Europe, specifically France and Spain. Similarly, they were mostly spending just a semester or two at the universities. Again, similar to University A, all the full-time undergraduates and all graduate students were from African countries, and they were pursuing three-year and one-year full-time programmes respectively. All the graduate participants were aged between 25–30. At neither university were there any non-African students pursuing a graduate programme.

The data was gathered between 2021 and 2022 and the data-gathering method was individual and group interviews. The coordinators were interviewed individually and face to face. Face-to-face group interviews were also conducted before and after the outbreak of Covid-19 for students at both universities. Four exchange students from University B were interviewed individually via Zoom. The key questions centred on the nature of international students and their motivations for choosing Ghana as their destination country, as well as what influenced their choice of university. Each participant was interviewed for a period of 45 minutes using an open-ended questionnaire developed by us, the researchers. The interviews were recorded and pseudonyms were used for participants.

6.1. Data analysis

The data was analysed using thematic and content analyses. We identified keywords, phrases, ideas and themes which were grouped using a coding system (Wilkinson, 2011). We also looked at how these words, phrases and themes are presented and the frequency with which they occur (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

The conceptual framework was informed by postcolonial theory. Postcolonialism describes “the residual, persistent and ongoing effects of European colonization” (Rizvi et al., 2006, p. 241). It has been argued that the achievement of political independence by many African countries did not eliminate the varied forms of inequality; rather, new forms of domination replaced colonialism (ibid.). International mobility, as an internationalisation strategy, tends to reify colonial legacies (author details to be provided). The theory helps to explain how colonial legacies and ideologies continue to influence the nature and motivations of international students attracted to Ghanaian universities and to recommend ways to mitigate the impact of postcolonial legacies on student mobility.

The ethical guidelines followed those provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). These ethical challenges revolve around voluntary informed consent, power relations, and the right to privacy. We consider some aspects of international students’ experiences to be sensitive. Therefore, the names or any other identifying characteristics of participants and their host institutions cannot be disclosed. Also, we were very conscious of the power dynamics. All the authors are practitioners at the institutions of the study. We, therefore, understood that participants who were mostly students could be vulnerable. We explained the aim of the research to them and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. No one was forced to participate in the research. It was also explained to them that they could skip any of the questions if they are not comfortable.

For ethical clearance, we submitted the study proposal to the Institutional Review Board of the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration. The Board suggested some minor changes. We effected the corrections and an approval letter was given with the reference number GM/IRB/2021/01.

7. Nature of international students

As reflected by participants in the study, in both universities, the majority of their international students are from the sub-Saharan region, including Nigeria, Togo, Cameroon, Benin, and Cote d’Ivoire. Others are from the Gambia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Botswana, with smaller numbers from the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, and Europe. Undergraduates are aged 17–25 years, and graduate students are 26–40.

Currently, University A has 610 international students. University B has about 350 international students with the majority of them from Nigeria. All of those from non-African countries were exchange students. In contrast, all of those pursuing full-time graduate and undergraduate programmes were from African countries.

Similarly, at University B, all students from non-African countries were exchange students who were spending only a semester or two in Ghanaian universities. Also, all participants were aged 18–25.

Again, similar to University A, all the undergraduates from African countries were pursuing full-time, three-year programmes and all the graduate student participants were from Africa, and they were full-time graduates pursuing one-year graduate programmes. All the graduate participants were aged 25–30. At neither university were there any non-African students pursuing a graduate programme.

8. Motivation for studying in Ghana and choice of institutions

The motivations of participants to study in Ghana were multifaceted involving institutional, positional and transformational. There were some variations and similarities in motivation between visiting students and full-time students, as well as between graduate and undergraduate participants.

8.1. Institutional policies

In my university, you have to do two semesters abroad in the third year. It was the policy. So for me, I am very interested in the African continent. (Nims, France, undergraduate, visiting student, University B,)

I'm also on a scholarship from a German scholarship exchange programme, the scholarship is from UNFP. The programme determined your country, so basically it's the programme that brought me here. (Saaj, South Africa, full-time graduate student, University A)

Institutionally, the majority of the exchange students were influenced by policies at their respective home universities, which either required or encouraged them to undertake a semester or two of their bachelor's programme abroad. In terms of the choice of country, mostly, their universities partnered with a particular university in Ghana. Some of the exchange students indicated that there were not many countries in Africa to choose from, compared to other continents. Others attributed the limited choice of universities in Africa to colonial legacies. These concerns are typified by this response:

... My school is partnered with over 200 universities around the world in more than 40 countries ... And these are places that are 'attractive', I want to put this in quotes because, in the West, there's a lot of ignorance about what Africa has to offer ... The attractive places are like the USA, South Korea, and China ... in these countries, you could even choose between cities, you know. If you wanted to go to New York or other cities in the USA ... you had multiple universities. Even within cities, you have one or two universities ... but for Africa, you barely had any choice, maybe five different countries for the entire continent. And it's the continent that has the most countries in the world. And yet, in the list of exchanges, there were just five countries ... (Angela, France, undergraduate visiting student, University B).

All the graduate students were enrolled in regional programmes, including the Public Sector Management Training Programme (PSMTP), the West Africa Centre for Crop Improvements (WACCI), and the Regional Institute for Population Studies (RIPS), which are hosted in Ghana. The majority of the graduate students were required to undertake their programmes in another African country. All the graduate international students at University A had chosen Ghana based on the policies of the programmes they subscribed to and also the popularity of

the university. For instance, students on the RIPS programme were compelled to choose Ghana because they were from Anglophone countries and the policies required them to study in Ghana.

At University B, the majority of those pursuing graduate programmes were sponsored by their respective governments. Mostly, the governments send some key officials for further training in Ghana. Most of these students were enrolled in the PSMTTP.

In this era of globalisation, internationalisation, and the global economy, studying abroad has become critical in many institutions (Jones, 2013; Knight, 2012; OECD, 2020).

In terms of institutions, almost all the exchange students had chosen either University A or B by default, based on which institution their home university was in partnership with. Generally, that particular Ghanaian university was the only one available on their original university's list of partnerships in Ghana. When they had a choice, some participants explained that they had chosen University A by default because it is considered one of the best in the African sub-region. One participant explained that both Universities A and B were in partnership with his institution. However, those who had the best grade points were sent to University A whilst those who scored lower were sent to University B. He was at University B based on his grades.

The nature of international students' and participants' motivation illuminates the continuing impact and vestiges of colonialism on higher education (Ploner & Nada, 2020). As indicated in this study, and confirming the literature (Knight, 2012), universities in developing and ex-colonial countries continue to attract few international students, particularly from Western countries. While higher educational institutions continue to become internationalised because of globalisation and internationalisation, African universities, for the most part, continue to wrestle to attract students from other regions of the global community. Few students choose to pursue programmes in universities in Ghana, similar to universities in many African settings. Colonial discourses, continue to paint Africans and the continent negatively and distort the narratives about the region.

It is interesting that, in both universities, all the full-time undergraduate students were Nigerians, and this reflects the statistics of international students in Ghana. The largest number of international students in Ghana are from Nigeria and are undergraduates (UNESCO, 2022). As indicated above, the majority of Nigerian students strategically choose to study in Ghana to boost their career opportunities, be closer to their families and also escape the political, educational and infrastructural insecurity in Nigeria. Again, the majority of graduate participants, who are all black Africans, arguably are compelled to be on these programmes based on the policies of the institutions that awarded them study scholarships.

This international mobility landscape reflects the historical dominance of the Global North in recruiting students. Many students from the African context and less developed countries would like to study at universities in the Global North, but not vice versa "even though the dream of 'one country one university' has long been realized by Africa" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 8).

Globalisation as indicated earlier is to accelerate the flow of people, culture, ideas, values, knowledge, technology, and economy across borders resulting in a more interconnected and interdependent world" (Knight, p. 45). But the major questions are on the direction of the flow and who controls the flow. As illuminated by the data, Ghanaian universities are hardly able to attract any significant number of non-African international students.

This international mobility also replicates the influence of colonial masters and their ex-colonies. For instance, students from former British colonies troop to the UK to pursue further education. In

2020–21 about 605,130 international students were studying in the UK (HESA, 2022). There were 2,795 Ghanaian students in the UK, while the number of entrants from Nigeria increased by 64% from 2019/20 to 2020/21, to 21,305. This is despite the impact of Covid when it was estimated that there would be a decline in international students globally (Altbach & De Wit, 2020). The British Council has reiterated that some countries in “Sub-Saharan Africa showed very strong growth” (HESA, 2022, para. 4). Of course, the positional and strategic motivation of the opportunity for students to work in the UK could be considered one of the major drivers for growth among non-EU students. The UK now has a newly opened Graduate Route, which allows students to stay in the UK to work for up to two years after completing a UK HE programme (Ibid.).

Generally, the inbound mobility rate for international students in Ghana is 1.1% (UNESCO, 2022). Interestingly, there are only about 15 students from the UK (Ibid.).

All visiting students in the study had chosen to study in Ghana because they were required by their respective institutions to study abroad. These few non-African international students seldom pursue full degree programmes but choose short-term, study-abroad programmes, which have recently become mandatory at many universities globally. No participant was also enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programmes.

Institutionally, the limited opportunities granted to students even by their institutions to study in Africa confirm the unequal status that continues to plague many African universities. Despite the assumed flow of students and staff across continents and nations in the context of internationalisation, few students from North America, Europe, or developed Eastern countries choose to pursue their university studies in Africa.

This reflects Cultural exchange programs to Africa in particular which were encouraged in the 1950s by American philanthropic entities (and later by other nations) as a way to study the African “other” as part of promoting race relations and cultural understanding. Historically, Africans have been sent to study in universities abroad, because the West and East wanted these students to be the carriers of their idealism. These students usually return to spread the Global North’s idealism in those African countries. It is still part of the colonial arrangements and vestiges.

Transnational borrowing and lending of ideas stipulate that the Global North is where knowledge and civilization reside and must be carried to the primitive and uncivilized parts of the world. Universities in ex-colonised countries are barely recognised in terms of status or knowledge generation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Unsurprisingly, some participants expressed concern about the limited choice of universities in Africa offered by their universities and argued that this is based on colonial and negative perceptions of Africa.

Scholars have expressed concern about the emergence of colonial HE characterised by a complex pattern of hegemonic processes and unequal power relations (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Ploner & Nada, 2020). Whilst changes are expected in student mobility, with the focus shifting away from popular destinations, including the UK and USA, prospective students will still choose other English-speaking countries, including Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand (Altbach & De Wit, 2017). This reflects historically unequal power relations and legacies of colonialism, which continue to play out in structures, institutions, relations, and processes today. Ndlovu-Gatsheni rightly argues that:

Europe and North America have remained sites of processing raw data into concepts and theories. These concepts and theories are then consumed in Africa. Africa remains a large laboratory for testing concepts and theories. This explains why many African students continue to make great treks to Europe and North America for education, even though the dream of ‘one country one university’ has long been realized by Africa (2018, 8).

The continual importance placed on globalisation and internationalisation will continue to heighten the prioritisation of Euro-Anglo knowledge systems.

8.2 Personal and socio-cultural rationales

Participants were motivated to study in Ghana for a variety of personal and socio-cultural reasons. For the majority of the exchange students, it provided a form of escape, a source of social exposure, and entertainment purposes. pls this is not a quote, so it should be removed from the box.

I wanted to come to a brand-new place, yeah, and I felt like Accra is a very liveable city and easy-going and I guess this is a nice destination. (Charlotte, Spain, undergraduate, University B)

It also served as an opportunity to learn from other people's cultures and broaden their perspectives, including meeting a need to experience a "developing" country, particularly an African country, and/or fulfilling an interest in experiencing the perceived rich culture of Ghana

I wanted the opportunity to learn from an African context ... even if not learning content in class, it's being able to see their ways by interacting with them. (Rio, undergraduate, USA, University A)

I wanted to go to an African country because I am Congolese ... to explore my Africanness (USA, University A, undergraduate)

Most graduate participants from African countries had a strong drive and desire to learn about the socio-cultural systems in Ghana. They aimed to gain research skills and an understanding of the socio-cultural perspectives of Ghana. They conveyed a strong curiosity to learn and also expressed a strong desire to tackle the intellectual and many other challenges confronting the African continent. They also expressed interest and a desire to engage with other African nationals to discuss scholarly and developmental issues about Africa.

I truly believe in Pan-Africanism in that I'm interested in finding out how we can ... I had to come to an African institute rather than a European institute. Also, I want to learn about African culture and history as people and I think literature has not done well in how we've been allowed to see ourselves with regards to history, development, and culture. (Mbisi, South Africa, University A, graduate programme)

It is interesting to note that although all the undergraduate participants were citizens of their respective countries of origin, the majority have African ancestry. All participants from University B had (at least) one parent who originated from Africa.

8.3 Recommendations from family and friends

The majority of participants generally chose Ghana through the recommendations of family and friends. Nigeria students particularly chose to study in Ghana based on the recommendations of their families.

I can say that the main reason I came to Ghana was my brother ... he had told me Ghana is good in the sense that there is peace. (Jennifer, Nigeria, University B, undergraduate)

Most often, the family were already resident or engaged in some businesses in Ghana. Recently, many Nigerians have migrated to Ghana and many more have various business engagements in Ghana. According to the King of the Igbo Community in Ghana, over, 2,000,000 Nigerians are currently residing in Ghana (Ghana Web, 2019).

My parents influenced the choice of my university and actually, it was not my choice. My mom does her business here in Ghana so she had a friend at ... and that made me go there but it was not nice so I had to leave and come to University B [Uche, Nigerian, undergraduate, University B]

Generally, families recommend it due to the positive perception of the security and liveliness of Ghanaians. The majority indicated their trust in Ghana's relative political and socio-economic stability as a major reason for choosing it as a country in which to study. There was also trust in the infrastructural development including electricity. Again, the political instability in Nigeria and the notorious strikes in universities, make parents decide to send their wards to Ghana to give them a stable education.

8.4 Academic rationales and perceived high value of certificates from the universities

The personal, social-cultural and academic motivations of participants to study in Africa, although they have positive connotations, equally demonstrate the continuing colonial legacy.

I came to Ghana because in Nigeria the educational system is not stable, I mean teachers going on strike, and all that. I decided to come to Ghana since the strike is low as compared to Nigeria is low. And also, we aren't doing business in Ghana [Nanbam, Nigeria, Undergraduate, University A].

I expect to get what I want, like, respect because I heard when you come to University B you're respected so I'm expecting that after my studies when I take my certificate out there, I should be respected. (William, Nigerian, University B undergraduate)

[University B] is also an elite school in Ghana and this is the reason we decided to come, because those who came here, we see the kind of impact they make back home ... and how they are respected. (Augustine, Liberia, Graduate student, University B)

As could be perceived by the quotes, all those who emphasised academic delivery as key motivation are those from African countries. For instance, almost all the Nigerian students from both universities, strategically pursued a degree in Ghana to enhance their career opportunities. They perceived Ghanaian universities as highly valued within the region for excellence and high standards in providing quality education. Participants noted that this will enhance their job opportunities. It will also boost their ego.

None of the exchange students we interviewed had chosen to study at the case-study universities based on the institutions' academic standards, prestige, or ranking. The majority of participants at both universities were more motivated by the opportunities to visit a new country and experience the culture and living experiences of the people than the chance to study at a particular institution. Choosing a university in Ghana mostly served as a form of escape and opportunities for entertainment, and other social purposes. Participants appeared greatly attracted to the city of Accra, which was seen as buzzing with activity with a high rate of diversity. It appears that their approach consisted more of a tourist gaze and perception than a desire for cultural awareness and transformation, which are perceived as key values in international mobility.

The motivations for exchange students when choosing institutions in Ghana deviate markedly from students' motivations for choosing universities in the Global North, which are mostly about prestige and enhancing career prospects (Ploner & Nada, 2020). Whilst most exchange students are initially pushed by institutional policies to pursue part of their programmes abroad, their motivation appears to be predominantly tied more to the "tourist gaze" approach. Their motivation appears less strategic, unlike students who choose to study in Western countries (Altbach & Engbert, 2014), who have higher expectations for improved job prospects and distinctive experiences.

The tourist gaze is “a socially organized way of seeing and experiencing a given locale” (Sharpe, 2015, p. 230). It positions international students to study the “other” from a distant location. The tourist gaze is “guided by the anticipation of pleasure and directed toward objects such as ethnic group, landscape, or cultural performance” (Sharpe, 2015, p. 230). Whilst exposure to different cultures is important for cultural competence in a global world, there is the need for other values offered by the universities to be equally emphasised. The tourist gaze allows international students, when behaving as tourists, to notice separation, otherness, and difference, while often neglecting to see how places are intimately bound to other economies, nations, and peoples. The tourist gaze highlights an “othering” process between visitors and the host community. There are nuances, with Nigerian students who enrol in programmes in Ghana.

Additionally, as indicated, the majority of the participants had an African background and expressed interest in becoming reconnected with Africa and learning more about the continent. There was a personal connection to their motivations. They were, however, quick to portray and in some cases explicitly state that these choices were not basically due to the academic laurels of the institutions. All the participants had chosen to study in Ghana to broaden their knowledge of, in particular, the cultural and social aspects of the country. It was more about the country than its institutions. Although in an increasingly globalised world, it is both practical and strategic for students to acquire intercultural experiences and competencies, the other strength of institutions in the global South must also be recognised and appreciated.

A major reason for this is the global class systems and university rankings. The university ranking systems and the “world-class” maxim have become a catalyst for students’ selection of universities (Rauhvargers, 2011). However, *world-class university* is ‘an ambiguous term that refers to an acclaimed position of the university among other similar institutions. It is mostly perceived as Neo-colonial (Siltaojam et al., 2019, p. 78). In addition, although the terminology “world-class” and other popular terms, such as “top-ranked” and “excellence”, are used to portray the quality of, in particular, the curriculum of an institution, it is more about branding and marketisation and “merely shifts the focus from substance to image” (Ibid.).

The world-class discourse “does not act as a guarantee of prestige or quality but only requires that the actors can do it credibly in the context of its appearance” (Siltaojam et al., 2019, p. 78). Mostly, universities in Western countries capitalize on their perceived prestige as Western institutions, to present themselves as prestigious with the highest quality (Ibid.). As emphasised by Chowdhury, et. al. (2023) in international spaces, peoples and institutions are often constructed as the “other” to serve the interests of Western institutions. They argue that “existing stereotypes about countries are deliberately used on flyers to draw [the] attention of prospective [students] and thus increase recruitment” (p. 580). Universities in the Global South have to rely mainly on recommendations from individuals to benefit from international student recruitment because, historically, they do not have an attractive “identity”.

In terms of world university rankings, since 2010, no African university has been among the top 200, except the University of Cape Town (e.g., World University Rankings, 2020), which has held a place between 130 and 160 for the last five years. But it should be noted that this institution has a different legacy compared to other African universities. It is a historically White university. No university from the continent has ever been in the top 100. The ranking systems showcase the “disparities in resources and the unevenness in the global production of knowledge, the effect of which is to legitimize such inequities” (Hazelkorn, 2018, p. 9).

The statements of students, particularly those with African origins, reveal their uncertain positions. All of the participants appeared uncomfortable with Western domination and the lower positioning of African countries and their institutions. While they abhorred the negative discourses of the dominance of Western universities, they also did not feel able to risk losing the advantages and benefits associated with a relationship with the West. Once again, the power relations are pervasive.

This reflects Bhabha's concepts of the ambivalence and mimicry of post-coloniality; to resist the misrepresentation of African countries and institutions, students compromise by choosing to study abroad in an African country, negotiating between the two worlds (Bhabha, 2004). Thus, they try in their "little" ways to eliminate the colonial binaries and prove to their colleagues, friends, and the world that African institutions are equally great. The interest in African universities, however, demonstrates a re-emerging and vital interest in Africa as a continent and its indigenous knowledge, cultures, values, and belief systems.

Globally, Africa continues to be mis/presented and portrayed as a continent plagued with civil wars, hunger, corruption, greed, selfishness, disease, and poverty (Poncian, 2015). The interest in Africa, and particularly among people deriving first-hand information about the continent, is an essential step towards eliminating such stereotypes and prejudices and also to positioning Africa within the global arena.

Most significantly, the majority of our graduate participants wanted to engage in research and interactions that would equip and position them to bring transformations to the continent and rectify some of the historical injustices. This motive should be lauded and encouraged as emphasised by Zeleza (2017) academic research enables the tackling and theorising of continuing inequalities by situating lived experiences within wider structures and discourses of oppression, and showing what is missing from the usual stories we tell ourselves (Ibid.).

The direction of students from the Global South to the Global North, and not vice versa, has serious implications for African societies in terms of transnational borrowing and lending of knowledge and ideas. We are likely to continue to consume knowledge from the Global North.

9. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

Despite the varied challenges confronting Ghanaian universities, they continue to attract international students. Students' choice to study in Ghana is based on institutional policies and personal, socio-cultural, academic and strategic rationales. Others are recommendations from friends and confidence in certificates derived from the institutions in the study.

However, the nature and motivations of the students who are attracted to these universities echo the idea that colonialism is not "over" but "lives on" through contemporary academic practices (Stein, 2016). Few non-Africans are attracted to Ghanaian universities and, mostly, these students spend just one semester there, with a minority spending two semesters. It was also demonstrated that the policies of the institutions of origin of these students do not encourage the choice of African countries.

As Ghanaian universities strive to recruit international students, this is also the right time to gradually but systematically move away from hegemonic neo-colonial forms of knowledge development towards the promotion of cross-cultural and intercultural competence and understanding.

The universities should be able to create their niche to attract international students. Since higher education is in a highly competitive domain there is a need for universities to adopt smart marketing strategies. These strategies could have a two-pronged effect on the universities. It will position them in the international space and also address the lingering colonial effects.

As this paper has illustrated, many of the exchange students we interviewed, and those on the graduate programmes expressed great passion and motivation for understanding African cultures, values, and knowledge systems. As students expressed interest in knowing more about Africa in general, and Ghana in particular, there should be determined and diverse efforts to emphasise these values in the lecture room. The curriculum should be diversified to support intercultural learning. Where applicable, different sets of literature could be used (Zeleza, 2017).

Furthermore, as students strive to expand their knowledge base, the right character, and global competence, universities should create the necessary enabling environment for them to achieve their goals. Ghanaian universities should utilise the opportunity of the interest in African and Ghanaian universities to provide excellent service and experiences for these international students.

The institutional and organisational policies, particularly for strategic graduate programmes to improve student mobility within the African region, should be encouraged and enhanced. The geographical location of the mobility programmes and engagement is an important consideration for several reasons, including financial sustainability and geopolitical benefits.

Also, exposure to other African countries will enhance confidence about Africa in young and emerging African scholars. It will provide a potentially powerful platform for bridging these cultures and will restore and strengthen African culture, African knowledge, and African wisdom.

The findings show that none of the African students was enrolled on short-term programmes. We argue that, as a start, students from the African region could be encouraged to pursue short programmes lasting for a semester or two. This will expand intraregional mobility and sustainability. Students who cannot afford full-time studies can engage in exchanges where credits will be transferred. This underlines how essential it is for the credit transfer system to be encouraged and used as a mechanism to harmonise regional higher education and encourage mobility. It is interesting that many African institutions are able to work out the transfer of credits with higher educational institutions in the Global North but not with other institutions in the sub-region. This is an interesting example of the colonial vestiges that make us lose confidence in ourselves and embrace foreign.

It will require a huge task for individual institutions to efficiently promote regional mobility programmes. Although HEIs remain the primary actors promoting student mobility, there is a need for support from governments and international organisations. This support can play a vital role in expanding the scope of such programmes and broadening the range of activities. Government support will strengthen the financial base and the sustainability of the mobility programme (Salmi, 2016).

Global universities should cast off their negative perceptions of African universities and should provide greater and broader opportunities for their students to engage with these universities in their study-abroad programmes. We acknowledge that this does not come easily. African institutions must also position themselves as power brokers for this to happen. Media discourses that portray African universities as lackadaisical in testing, grade inflation, and professors sleeping with women for grades, among others, should be challenged. These continue to create mistrust.

10. Limitations and recommendations for future study

The paper utilised the qualitative methodology. Although this methodology provided the opportunity to have an in-depth study on the motivation of international students in the two universities, it limited the number of universities and participants involved in the study.

We recommend a quantitative study on student motivation which will have the advantage of utilising many more universities and participants.

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Correction

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