

The Determinants of Return and Non-return Intentions of International Students in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to determine the determinants of return/non-return intentions (to home countries) of international students. Data was collected through the use of self-administered questionnaires in a survey. The results indicated that 44% of the respondents intend to stay and 66% have return intentions. The results indicated that the two most important determinants of return intentions are family and friends in home country and lower opportunities of getting a job in South Africa. The two primary determinants of non-return intentions are better employment opportunities in South Africa and better economic standard of living in South Africa better compared to home country.

INTRODUCTION

According to the International Education Association of South Africa (2004), within the continent of Africa, particularly the sub-continent of Southern Africa, South Africa's higher education sector is the largest, strongest and most diverse offering a full range of courses and qualifications. Many of South Africa's universities are world-class academic institutions at the cutting edge of research in various spheres. The country's setting and leading role in Africa, its strong research universities and its relatively advanced stage of development make it an ideal base for studies aimed at understanding the challenges of developing countries and Africa. The South African education sector, particularly the higher education sector, has opened up to students from other countries within Africa and outside. Changes in higher education (HE) in South Africa have been driven by developments in the international context such as the effects of globalization (Dison et al. 2008). Better educational opportunities in host countries compared to home countries are a major driver of the migration of international students (Hazen and Alberts 2006).

There are 23 public universities in South Africa. Three new public universities will commence operations in 2014. The number of graduates produced annually by South African Universities has been steadily growing, from 74,000 in 1994 to more than 1,27,000 in 2007, (Internation-

al Education Association of South Africa 2008). The number of international students enrolled specifically at South Africa's higher institutions, has grown dramatically since 1994. According to Higher Education South Africa (2010), in 1999 there was over 100% increase in international students taking the total from 17,129 in 1998 to 34,770 in 1999. By 2009, international numbers had grown to 60,586. Over this period the average increase in international student participation has been 13% per annum. About a quarter of these international students are postgraduates.

Rasool and Botha (2011) point out that skill shortage is very real in South Africa. "Staying" or non-return international students can help to reduce skill shortage in South Africa. In addition, the level of entrepreneurship is low in South Africa. According to Turton and Herrington (2012), South Africa's Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate decreased from 9.1% in 2011 to 7.3% in 2012. South Africa's TEA is significantly below the average of efficiency-driven countries (14.3%). This indicates the South Africa's consistently below-average trend in early-stage entrepreneurial activity relative to countries with a similar economic development level. In addition, the number of potential entrepreneurs in South Africa is below international standards. Potential entrepreneurs are defined as those who perceive good business opportunities and believe that they have entrepreneurial capabilities. Potential entrepreneurs include students in the

universities. South Africa's rate of perceived opportunities is 36%. This is below the average for efficiency-driven economies of 41%. The country's rate for perceived capabilities is 40%, below the average for of perceived opportunities efficiency-driven economies of 52% (Turton and Herrington 2012). According to Maskus et al. (2013), attracting more talented international students to study in the universities and encouraging them to launch entrepreneurial ventures here can help to revitalize innovation and economic growth in a country. Although there are many international students in South Africa, little is known about their return intentions. A thorough review of the literature on return intentions (Brink 2012; Makina 2012) revealed that no study has empirically investigated the return intentions of international students in South Africa.

Objectives of the Study

International students can help to reduce skill shortage and improve the level of entrepreneurship in South Africa. The objectives of the study are (1) to investigate the determinants of international students' return intentions to their home countries and (2) to investigate the determinants of international students' non-return intention to their home countries.

Literature Review

Four broad theoretical frameworks are used to explain international migration: (1) the neo-classical economic theory of migration (2) the theory of immigrant assimilation, (3) the new economies of labour migration theory and (4) the Standard models of migration. According to the neo-classical economic theory of migration by Todaro (1969), wage differences between countries are the major force of migration of students who intend to stay abroad after their studies. Wok and Leland (1982) observe that the word assimilation from the theory of immigrant assimilation is generally defined as the process by which a group of people, new to an area, adapt to the destination area's culture, values and tradition. The new economies of labour migration theory by Stark (1991) views migration as a livelihood strategy employed by households and families to diversify income risks and overcome market constraints such as difficulty in obtain-

ing credit and insurance in the country of origin. The standard models of migration view migration as an investment decision, in which potential migrants weigh up the gain in wages from migrating with the costs of doing so. The emphasis in these models is on income maximization as the reason for migration (Rogers and Watkins 1987).

Pimpa (2004) points out that international students stay on in the host countries because of funding opportunities. According to Gungor and Tansel (2008), higher salaries offered in the host country and lifestyle preferences, including a more organized environment in the host country, increase the probability of student non-return. Peng (2012) argues that migration is viewed as a result of expected income. If the expected income is much greater in the host country than in the home country, the likelihood of staying is much greater. Better working conditions in host country compared to home country increase non-return intention.

Gungor and Tansel (2003) point out that push and pull factors contribute to non-return and return intentions. Push factors include factors such as inadequate number of jobs in the home country, few opportunities, primitive work and social conditions, crime, famine, political fear, poor medical care, and natural disasters. Pull factors are factors that attract people to a certain location. These include job opportunities, better living conditions, political or and religious freedom; enjoyment; education; better medical care and security. When individuals compare all these to their home country, a decision is made to return or not to return.

Soon (2010) agree that there are push and pull factors which contribute to student return or non-return intentions. Push factors include not enough jobs in the home country, few opportunities, primitive working conditions, famine; political fear, poor medical care, crime and natural disasters. The pull factors are factors that attract people to a certain location. These are job opportunities, better living conditions, political or and religious freedom, enjoyment, education, better medical care and security. Students who initially intend to return home upon completion of studies have higher probabilities of returning home. Students with favourable perceptions of their home countries in terms of lifestyle and knowledge application opportunities are more likely to return home. The longer a

student stays in a host country for his studies, the more likely he or she is to experience a change of intention from “initially intended to return to currently not intended to return home.” The longer a student stays in a host country the more likely he will assimilate the culture of the host country.

Zeithammer and Kellogg (2013) argue that overseas Chinese students tend to be willing to return when the ratio of income in host country and home country is three times. Gungor and Tansel (2005) agree that higher salaries offered in the host country and lifestyle preferences, including a more organized environment in the host country, increase the probability of student non-return. However, the compulsory service requirements attached to government scholarships increases the probability of student return intention.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study focused on graduating (those that were about to complete undergraduate and post-graduate degrees) international students at two universities. The two universities are located in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces of South Africa. Data was collected through the use of self-administered questionnaire in a survey. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used. The questionnaire was divided into three parts (1) biographical information (2) return intentions and (3) non-return intentions. Five-point Likert scale questions ranging from “1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree” were used to measure return/non-return intentions. The questionnaire was modified from previous studies on return/non-return intentions such as Soon (2010) and Peng (2012). A pilot study was conducted on the survey instrument used in this

research with 20 students in order to ensure face and content validity. The pilot study led to some modifications to the questionnaire. Owners were assured of confidentiality with regard to the data collected. Descriptive statistics was used for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

186 questionnaires were sent out and 101 returned. The response rate was 54.6%. The results indicated that most of the respondents were in the 21-35 age group. 57% of the respondents were male and 43% female. 74% of the respondents were undergraduates, 21% Honours and 5% Masters students. 48% of the respondents were Management and Law students, 24% from Science and Agriculture, 22% from Humanities and 4% from Health Sciences.

Return/Non- return Intention

To measure return/non-return intention, the respondents were asked the following question: “Do you intend to stay in South Africa after your studies?” The results indicated that 56% of the respondents intend to return to their home countries on the completion of their studies. In addition, the results indicated that 44% of the respondents have non-return intention. Thus it can be concluded that the majority of international students intend to return to their home countries after their studies.

Reasons for Return Intentions

Table 1 depicts the mean scores for the determinants of return intentions. The results in-

Table 1: The determinants of return intention

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Better job opportunities in home country	3.02	0.83
Family and friends in home country	4.67	0.94
Home country needs the skills and knowledge obtained	3.82	0.88
Feeling more comfortable with home county culture	3.03	0.91
Higher economic standard of living at home	1.62	1.28
Better quality of life in home country	1.60	0.94
Perceived difficulty in getting a job in South Africa	4.53	0.78
Higher level of crime in South Africa	3.25	0.80
Xenophobia against foreigners in South Africa	3.20	0.51
Lack of information about legal procedures to stay in South Africa	3.02	1.42
Challenges in adapting to lifestyle in South Africa	1.25	1.36
Different social-cultural situation in South Africa compared to home country	1.14	1.07

dicates that the four most important determinants of return intentions are: family and circle of friends in home country (4.67), perceived difficulty in getting a job in South Africa (4.53), home country needs skills and knowledge (3.82) and crime (3.25). The four least important determinants of return intentions are: higher economic standard of living in home country (1.62), better quality of life in home country (1.60), challenges in adapting to the lifestyle in South Africa (1.25) and different social-cultural situation in home country (1.24). The results are consistent with previous empirical studies on international students return intentions such as Gungor and Tansel (2003), Hazen and Alberts (2006), Soon (2010) and Peng (2012).

Reasons for Non-return Intentions

Table 2 depicts the mean scores of the reasons for staying abroad after completion of study. The three most important determinants of non-return intentions are: better economic standard of living in South Africa (4.35), better employment opportunities in South Africa (4.22) and better quality of life in South Africa (4.05). The two least important determinants of non-return intentions are: better political situation in South Africa compared to home country (1.98) and ties to family and friends in South Africa (1.45). The results are consistent with the findings of Soon (2010) on the determinants of international students' non-return intentions.

Table 2: The determinants of non-return intentions

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Better employment opportunities in South Africa	4.22	1.11
Better economic standard of living in South Africa	4.35	1.14
Better quality of life in South Africa	4.05	1.25
More competitive wages	4.08	0.98
Better opportunities to further education	3.95	1.22
Ties to family and friends in South Africa	1.45	1.33
Better political situation in South Africa compared to home country	1.98	1.28

CONCLUSION

The research investigated the return/non-return intention of international students in South Africa. South Africa suffers from an acute shortage of skills and a low level of entrepreneurship. Well- educated international students can help to reduce the dire skill shortage in South Africa if they stay after their studies. The results indicate that the majority of international students intend to go back home after their education in South Africa. The results indicate that the four most important determinants of return intentions are family and circle of friends in home country, perceived difficulty in getting a job in South Africa, home country needs skills and knowledge and crime. The four least important determinants of return intentions are higher economic standard of living in home country, better quality of life in home country, challenges in adapting to the lifestyle in South Africa and different social-cultural situation in home country. The three most important determinants of non-return intentions are better economic standard of living in South Africa, better employment opportunities in South Africa and better quality of life in South Africa. The two least important determinants of non-return intentions are better political situation in South Africa compared to home country and ties to family and friends in South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Information about the legal procedures to stay in South Africa by international students must be well advertised by the Department of Home Affairs in local and international media. The Home Affairs Department and the International Students Departments of universities need to improve coordination. This will help to improve the flow of information to international students about the legal procedures to stay in South Africa. In addition, the requirements for skilled graduates to stay in South Africa must be relaxed, so that it will not be difficult for skilled graduates to obtain jobs, work and residency permits in South Africa. Thus, changes to immigration rules that will encourage international students to stay in South Africa after the completion of their education should be encouraged. In addition, efforts should be made by the

government to reduce crime and xenophobia in South Africa as these factors can drive away skilled foreign graduates.

LIMITATION AND AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The study was focused only on two universities in South Africa. Therefore care should be exercised in the generalisation of the results. Other studies could investigate the impact of nationality, gender and field of study on the return intentions of international students

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