



Attractions to and Challenges involved in Studying Abroad: the Case of Kampala International University

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Abstract. Uganda is a major foreign higher education student receiving country in Eastern Africa. However, hitherto, the factors attracting foreign students to the country and the challenges the students encounter in studying at the institutions had not attracted scholarly attention. Therefore, taking the case of Kampala International University, this study investigated these attractions and challenges. Using questionnaire, data were collected from a random sample of 120 international students and analysed using percentages. The findings were that the quality with which Ugandan higher education is associated; security in Uganda; diversity and flexibility of study programs and schedules in the country's higher education system; friendliness of student immigration policies; and affordability of study programs attract foreign students to the country. Conversely, rising costs of living, language barriers and differences in pre-university academic achievement grading systems between Uganda and some foreign student sending countries were identified as the main challenges facing the international students.

Keywords: International students; Study abroad; Cross border education

1 Introduction

The world over, study abroad is one of the fastest growing elements of higher education (Brooks & Waters, 2009; Cross & Rouhani, 2004; Lassegard, 2006). In the East and Central African region, Uganda is a top higher education student receiving country. In 2006, for example, the country attracted 11, 992 students (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2006). Kampala International University (KIU) attracted majority (56%) of these students and, indeed, the university exhibits a significantly diversified foreign student population (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Foreign Students at KIU by Nationality (2008 / 2009)

Nationality	Number of Students
Angola	3
Bangladesh	1
Burundi	15
Cameroon	2
Comoros	1
Denmark	1
DRC	16
Eritrea	22
Ethiopia	7
Germany	1
India	4
Ivory coast	1
Kenya	2,655
Liberia	2
Malawi	2
Nigeria	8
Philippine	3
Rwanda	223
Somali	185
South Africa	1
Spain	1
Sudan	297
Sweden	2
Tanzania	433
USA	5
Zambia	2
Zimbabwe	1

Source: KIU Databank

Clearly, as is the case with study abroad in other countries and higher education institutions, the international students at KIU bring several advantages to the university and the country as a whole. Ensuring that these benefits are maximised requires that the factors attracting the foreign students to the university and the challenges that they face in their efforts to study at the university are well understood. Hitherto, however, research had not been conducted into these attractions and challenges. Thus, this study was conducted to fill this knowledge gap. The study undertook to respond to two research questions: 1) what are the main factors attracting international students to study

at Kampala International University? 2) What are the main challenges faced by the international students at Kampala International University?

2 Methodology

2.1 Basic Assumptions

The study was based on the assumption that; 1) a random sample of international students is satisfactorily representative of the international students at KIU; and 2) international students are conversant with the attractions to study in Uganda as well as the challenges faced by international students in the country, since these students were going through the experience of study in the country as foreign students. The inference here is that the data collected and, subsequently, conclusions drawn were taken to be valid.

2.2 Design

The study was carried out following a case study design, because its specificity of focus would allow identification of features that are unique to the bridging program, enabling the researchers to understand its effectiveness and the factors influencing it (Bell, 2005). Notwithstanding, it is offered for generalization at a national level because KIU is the flagship foreign student receiving country in Uganda, meaning that data collected from the institution may be representative of the national situation. Cross sectional data on the factors attracting international students to the university and the challenges that the students experience were collected from the students themselves. Additional information required for the study on the education systems of the students' sending countries were culled from relevant documentary sources.

2.3 Sample

A random sample of 120 respondents was involved in the study. The students were drawn from the finalist cohort of the 2009/2010 academic year and included those specialising in Arts/ Humanities, Science/ Technology and Mixed study programs. The cohort was prioritised because its members had been involved in study in Uganda for a reasonably long period of time for their views on both the attractions to study in the country and the challenges involved in the experience of study in the country to be taken as plausible. Out of 120 questionnaires administered, 88 were retrieved representing 73 per cent return rate, which is satisfactory.

2.4 Data Sources and Instrument

Data on attractions to study at KIU and challenges experienced in studying at the university were collected using a questionnaire that was administered to the international students that were involved in the study. The questionnaire had two parts namely; 1) attractions to study at KIU; and 2) challenges confronting foreign students at the university. The reliability of the instrument was established using the test retest method while its internal consistency was established using Cronbach's Alpha. Pearson's correlation coefficient for the results of the first and second tests of the instrument was .78 while Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was established at .82. Key informants were also interviewed on the ways in which the university is responding to the challenges affecting international students at the university.

2.5 Analysis

The students' responses on the factors attracting them to study at KIU and those on the challenges that they experienced were categorised along the themes that they pointed to. Each response was categorised under a theme. In instances a response could not be categorised among the themes that had been developed, however, a new theme would be developed. Accordingly, the respondents' views were tallied among the themes. Thereafter, frequency counts of the tallies were obtained. These were then converted into percentages and presented on Tables.

2.6 Limitations

The sample size was not scientifically derived from the population of international students at KIU. Thus, the conclusions of the study may neither be exhaustive of the attractions to study at the University nor generalised to the entire international students' population at the university and in the country as a whole.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted with the informed consent of the management of KIU. Anonymity of the respondents was also ensured through concealing their identity and reporting the findings of the study in aggregates.

3 Findings

3.1 Factors Attracting International Students to KIU

The factors attracting international students to study at KIU are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors Attracting Foreign Students to KIU

Factor	N	Agree	Rank	N	Disagree	Rank
Affordability	68	77.4	10	20	22.6	6
Duration of program	75	85.5	4	13	14.5	12
High standard of higher education	69	78.5	7	19	21.5	9
Efficiency of the higher education system	77	87.8	2	11	12.2	14
Love for exposure	61	68.8	11	27	31.2	5
Buoyant economy	55	62.2	12	33	37.8	4
Relative peace and security	76	86.9	3	12	13.1	13
Employment opportunities	38	43.4	14	50	56.6	2
Hospitality of the people	69	78.0	9	19	22.0	7
Less stressful immigration procedures	70	79.5	6	18	20.5	10
Social facilities (power, water, etc.)	69	78.3	8	19	21.7	8
Cultural affinity	55	62.0	13	33	38.	3
Marriage demands	23	26.5	15	65	73.5	1
The Charter status	81	92.5	1	07	7.5	15
Staff and student discipline.	72	81.5	5	16	18.5	11

Table 2 shows a rank order of factors attracting foreign student to higher institutions in Uganda. Top on the list is the granting of charter status with 92.5% followed by the efficiency of the higher education system (no frequent strikes) with 87.8% while 86.9% indicated their option for higher institution in Uganda as a result of relative peace and stability. Also sharing a high scores are factors like duration of programme (85.5%), staff and student discipline (81.5%), among others. On the contrary, two most pressing issues not likely to attract foreign students include marriage demands (73.5%) and the possibility of employment opportunities after graduation (56.6%). By marriage demands, we mean the tendency that inter-marriage with Ugandans may inform attending a Ugandan higher institution.

3.2 Challenges Facing International Students at KIU

The findings on the challenges international students at KIU face are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Challenges Facing Foreign Students at KIU

Challenge	N	Agree (%)	Rank	N	Disagree (%)	Rank
Language and communication	45	52.9	9	41	47.1	3
Difference in credit system	61	70.6	4	25	29.4	8
Cultural diversity/ barriers	45	52.4	10	41	47.6	2
Financial constraints	60	69.9	5	26	30.1	7
Family pressures	42	48.8	11	44	51.2	1
Police presence on campus	52	60.7	7	34	39.3	5
High cost of living and accommodation	73	85.4	1	13	14.6	11
Poor orientation of new students	52	61.0	6	34	39.0	6
Short time for research and consultations	51	59.8	8	35	40.2	4
Penalties for late registration	65	75.5	2	21	24.7	10
High fees	62	71.8	3	24	28.2	9

Table 3 shows that high cost of living and accommodation (85.4%) around university locations, high fees added to penalties for late payment of fees (71.8% and 75.5% respectively); the rigorous processes involved in conversion of certificates tendered for admission into degree programmes (70.6%) and even very tough financial constraints are the first 5 very serious problems confronting foreign students in Ugandan higher institutions especially the private ones. In addition, foreign students, especially those from non-pure English-speaking countries like Sudan, Rwanda, Eritrea, and Somalia have the problems of language communication (52.9%). The magnitude of language barriers is particularly pressing because many of the international students hail from non-English speaking countries (Table 4).

Table 4: Distribution of International Students by Language of Sending Country

Official Language	Number of Students
Amharic	7
Arabic	482
Danes	1
English	2683
French	257
German	1
Hindu	1
Kiswahili	433
Portuguese	3
Spanish	2
Swedish	2
Tigrigna	22
Grand Total	3894

Source: KIU Databank

Table 4 shows that the international students at KIU hailed from twenty six countries. Many of these countries do not use English as a medium of instruction, so students from the countries are encumbered by the use of English as the lingua franc and medium of instruction at the university. Incongruence between the education structure and, subsequently, credit system of the international students' sending countries and Uganda's structure was also cited as a challenge (Table 2). This is corroborated by the findings from the university's databank, indicating that majority of the international students came from countries with education systems that are incongruent with Uganda's system (Table 5).

Table 5: International Students by Sending Country's Education Structure

Sending Country's Structure of Education	No. of Students
4-5-5-5	1
5-5-5-3	4
5-5-2-4	16
7-6-5	1
6-3-3-4	2
6-3-3-4	8
6-4-2-4	223
6-7-2	1
7-6-3	17
6-4-4	3
7-4-2-3	433
9-6-4	15
7-5-3	2
7-5-2	2
8-4-4	2,841
6-4-2	1
9-3-4	297
9-3-3	25
12-4-4	7
Total	3899

Source: KIU Databank

3.3 KIU's Response to Challenges Affecting International Students

3.3.1 Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)

Admission of applicants into graduate schools in KIU is processed with the performance in GMAT. It is an objective measure of academic abilities to

supplement subjecting criteria used in the selection process such as interviews, grades and references. This according to Jaffe and Hilbert (2006) allows prospective students to be tested under similar conditions in using the same grading standards in order to establish a more accurate picture of their all-round abilities.

3.3.2 Bridging Course

The Access programme is a pre-university programme designed for students who do not meet the minimum qualification for entry into KIU degree or diploma programmes. It is a straight term of six (6) months with two continuous assessment in-between of 800 hours of lectures and qualifying examinations exclusively for non-Ugandans without Advance Level Certificates. Students who hold a Kenyan Certificate of Education (KCSE) and other related Certificates from other Countries i.e. 8.4.4 system and wish to enrol for either Degree or Diploma courses have to pass through the Access Programme. To qualify for the Access Programme, students of the previous Access groups, 1,2,3...16 required a minimum mean grade of C-(Minus) but has now been revised to C(Plain) Since March 2004 intake. The result is equivalent to Uganda Advance Level Certificate which is required for normal University admissions for Bachelors Degree.

3.3.3 Language and Communication Skills

A two-semester core course called English language and communication skills I and II has been introduced to upgrade students proficiency in written and spoken English. It is compulsory for all and has been immensely useful for applicants from non-English speaking countries admitted into KIU.

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