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Academic xenophobia in South Africa – issues, challenges and solutions: Reflections on an ASSAf Roundtable

Significance:

Anti-black African xenophobia is a pressing issue in South Africa, from the streets to our universities. Physical threats against honest university administrators and non-nationals have become legion. Yet foreign academics and teachers contribute directly to local education and employment which would be much poorer without them. This Commentary, which reports on a [Roundtable discussion of this issue](#), explores the form of this prejudice, the consequences for the institutions and individuals concerned, and the implications for South African glocalisation.

In vogue during the dark days of late apartheid were terms like 'international hotel', or more idiotically, 'international toilet'. 'International' in the apartheid lexicon meant multiracial and multinational. These categories were introduced after the Transkei's 'independence' in 1976 to facilitate black Bantustan and foreign African diplomats who were visiting 'white' South Africa. Anyone could now legally use facilities officially designated as 'international'. After apartheid, 'international' took on some new negative connotations when associated with the Afrophobic term, 'makwerekere', black African in-migrants ('foreigners') whose presence in a liberated South Africa was often resented.

What does 'international' mean for any South African city hosting one or more universities? I actively assisted in the recruitment of international students and interinstitutional collaborations in the 1990s under the auspices of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) International Office. That Office, at the time, was looking to 'decolonise' UKZN by attracting fee-paying African students onto the university's diversifying campuses.

Glocalisation, until the international supply chain was disrupted by COVID-19 in 2020, was the new buzz word. Until then, 'being local' meant that universities needed to go global. Still, most universities are now operating in an internationally competitive intercultural knowledge market. If our universities remain parochial, so will our students, our research topics and our educational priorities. National policymaking will reflect this parochialism, as echoed by the panellists who contributed to the 9th Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) [Presidential Roundtable Discussion](#) held on 24 November 2022. The topic was 'The Threat of Academic Xenophobia to the Future of South African Universities'.

If UKZN was indeed the 'Premier University for African Scholarship' as it claimed from 2004, then we must understand that Africa is not just the KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa or even Africa. As the African diaspora is everywhere now across the Western world, that's the identity that we need to embrace, and that was the advice offered by the Roundtable panellists. But more, our institutional and employment and recruitment policies must reflect an international remit. It is internationalisation at every level that vests excellence in the world's top universities because these institutions attract the best students and scholars from everywhere, as Jonathan Jansen, President of ASSAf, observed while chairing the panel.

Universities, although they are places of open learning, are not immune to 'academic xenophobia', a term invented for the Roundtable discussion. In this Commentary on the Roundtable invited by the *South African Journal of Science*, I attempt to provide a frame of reference and some affirmative thoughts deriving from the discussion.

The scourge of xenophobia

The visible signs of anti-immigrant violence that play out on the streets and poorer areas of South Africa are economically disruptive. This behaviour transgresses human rights and sometimes even involves assassination.¹ In the academic arena, prejudice directed against 'foreigners' (i.e. students and academic staff recruited predominantly from the former frontline states of Zimbabwe and Zambia), occurred from the mid-1990s when the first wave of excited, exciting and exhilarating international graduate scholars and newly appointed lecturers arrived expectantly on many South African campuses. For some universities this influx positively reshaped these institutions in terms of diversity – intellectually, conceptually and culturally – repositioning them as regional players. The in-migrants' own earlier historical experiences of arrested liberation had matured them to benefit and be benefitted by the brave new world that South Africa had promised in the mid-1990s.

From pervasive intellectual, cultural and historical parochialism, reinforced by the cultural and academic boycotts during the apartheid era, South Africa instantly from 2 February 1990, with the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the liberation movements, became the focus of intrigued global attention. One of the first to set up an International Office in 1992 was UKZN, which in short time had signed up well over 200 collaboration agreements, with its campuses swamped with visiting delegations. South African academics and students were thereby invited to become global academic citizens. They were recipients of international grants, engaging in collaborative projects and securing previously unimaginable teaching, sabbatical, research, exchange and resourcing opportunities.



Instead of capitalising on this once-off and extraordinary Mandela effect for the national benefit, the reaction from many students and staff, often the first generation of their cohort, was anxiety. It seems that little had changed by the end of 2022, as was indicated by everyone who spoke on the ASSAf panel.

The Roundtable panellists discussed their respective experiences and what can be done to develop a progressive employment regime that is built on the academic values of the modern cosmopolitan university. The discussion started rather starkly with Nicole Fritz's future-alert. Director of the Helen Suzman Foundation, Fritz drew attention to the impending sub-Saharan intra-continental migration that is being caused by climate change. This mass movement is anticipated to become an "existential issue" in the near term.

Simultaneously, staying the threatened termination of Zimbabwean exemption work permits was one of the Foundation's projects. The South African Department of Home Affairs' announcement in 2022 that permits would be revoked was made without consultation with the affected constituencies, including schools, colleges and universities that employ Zimbabwean expatriates. These kinds of ad hoc decisions indicate a lack of foresight by the much-criticised department with regard to migration planning and burden shearing, not to mention academic productivity (see for example Grant²). Fritz asked whether universities were educating their graduates to address these kinds of concerns.

The panellists who followed were Evance Kalula (Zambia), Emeritus Professor of Law, University of Cape Town; Precious Simba (Zimbabwe), Lecturer, Department of Education Policy Studies, Stellenbosch University; and South African Sakhela Buhlungu (Vice-Chancellor, University of Fort Hare [UFH]). The chair was Jonathan Jansen, ASSAf President.

The theme of the Roundtable

My approach here is to précis the issues common to the panel and then, using my own experience deriving from my closeness to the early UKZN International Office, to draw out some measures to close the discussion on an affirmative note.

Jansen³ has argued that one of the most serious threats facing higher education and the scientific enterprise in South Africa is the rising tide of academic xenophobia. The contradictions unleashed by internationalisation during the 1990s have intensified, it seems, given the examples offered by the panellists. While 14 of the 15 universities surveyed by Simba proclaim themselves as African training and research institutions, a "disconnect" often occurs within them in the form of xenophobia targeted at "foreign African nationals." Yet, as Fritz pointed out in comparison, the USA-quartered enabler of the criminal capture of the South African Revenue Services (SARS), Bain and Co, was spared the same kind of popular opprobrium, even though exposed in the Nugent and Zondo Commissions and in the national news media. The Nugent Commission, led by Judge Robert Nugent, investigated the failure of governance at SARS, which enabled state capture by international criminals detailed in no less than eight volumes by the Commission headed by Judge Raymond Zondo (available here: <https://www.statecapture.org.za/site/information/reports>)

Resentment by South African hosts usually emanates from a sense of insecurity and entitlement, triggered by competition for resources and opportunities. Nevertheless, Kalula observed that while he has "encountered hostility from colleagues and line managers," that his students "from across all races, have been very receptive [to foreigners]." The panel spoke candidly, largely from the heart, illustrated with examples of discrimination against foreigners. They talked about themselves being in the "trenches," and indeed just six weeks after the Roundtable, Buhlungu survived a second attempt on his life, although sadly his bodyguard was killed. Reports of other senior UFH managers having been previously (and since) attacked and assassinated by those engaged in "mischief" now made the national press. "Fort Hare under Siege" screamed the *Sunday Times* (8 January 2023, p. 1).

Previously, one of my former UKZN colleagues, Malawian Gregory Kamwendo, who had moved to University of Zululand (UZ), was executed

for exposing degree fraud. Vice-chancellors, deans and legal officers often require 24-hour protection. This mafia type behaviour emanates from organised criminals internal to universities who are looting public resources and state-owned enterprises, and assassinating honest staff and whistleblowers who resist corruption. Kamwendo's killers and those of his South African UZ colleagues involved, however, considered the university merely a resource to be milked at whatever price. Dysfunctional universities riddled with fraud and corruption were largely inherited from the now dis-established Bantustans, although some such universities, as Jansen reminded, have succeeded in reinventing themselves. These, and many more equally alarming instances, are documented in Jansen's book *Corrupted*⁴, launched within a few months of the panel discussion.

The international contribution

In justifying his appointment of a foreign African national as an acting registrar in the face of such threats during a period of UFH meltdown, Buhlungu observed that the institution "pulled through, not because of his 'foreignness', but for his integrity, firmness and his principled approach to administration."

As UKZN Vice-Chancellor Brenda Gourley observed during the 1990s, tactically leveraging a 1980s' union slogan, 'an injury to one university is an injury to all'. Donors, international partners and funders lose faith and cancel collaborations, withdraw resources and terminate staff-student exchanges. Fearful local students who can afford the fees divert to expensive but safe private colleges. Everyone is affected, no matter their locations and no matter the security arrangements at the safer campuses.

The issue of personal safety backgrounded each panellist's concern. Notwithstanding such anxiety, Kalula revealed that he had personally benefitted from being taught by exiled lecturers from South Africa, Uganda and Nigeria in his native Zambia. But he acknowledged that a university in which its nationals were in the minority "has a problem." However, simply "blaming foreign academics, and especially African ones, for the absence of local ones is wrong," he cautioned. The fear of victimisation on the basis of their countries of origin has deterred many African intellectuals now teaching in the global diaspora from applying to South African universities. The 1990s outmigration from universities of native South Africans into very well-paid government jobs, the civil service and business, resulted in a shortage of local academics in many rural institutions, creating a vacuum that has been filled by foreign expatriates, predominantly Zimbabweans and Nigerians. Indeed, the early loss included UFH's first black post-apartheid vice-chancellor who was appointed as the national unity government's first minister of education.

'Foreigners', a term used pejoratively in some selection committees on which I myself served during the transition, were sometimes accused during the first decade of liberation of being opportunistic interlopers exploiting unfair advantage of gaps in the academic sector. The result is that internal discrimination with the ending of apartheid was supplanted by antagonism against African foreigners who it is claimed: (1) usurp jobs from South Africans; (2) compete with South Africans for scarce resources; (3) exhibit a culture of entitlement in that South Africa owes them for taking an anti-apartheid stance; and (4) engage in criminality, although there is little evidence to support this allegation (Fritz). South Africans like to play at being the "victim" – being at the mercy of the Other, being stereotyped and accused "of everything" (Buhlungu).

Underpinning these assumptions is that wealth is understood by the criminals and some political ideologues to be a technical redistributive process rather than also a productive procedure that is created by entrepreneurial activity, capacity building and intellectual investment. Initiative is what counts, not 'entitlement', that has so often resulted in institutional failure. The "killing fields" to which Buhlungu referred in the *Sunday Times* front page occurred, ironically, because of UFH's first clean audit in 30 years.

Backgrounding the panel's deliberations was that South Africa has been engaged in nation-building during a conjuncture when some other nations and empires have been fragmenting. Identity creation requires the forging of a single South Africanism in the face of extensive domestic



diversity. Othering the Other (other Africans) is one way of forging an 'us'–'them' dichotomy towards fostering a national identity. Yet, as Simba cautioned about ringfencing nationality in the global academic marketplace, "Universities should always see themselves as part of a larger community of knowledge and should always hold themselves to the high standards that the society holds us to." This claim to African identity in the 14 local universities' mission statements, she concluded, raises questions on the nature of the disconnect between institutional PR, their "imagined" identity and the actual "performance" in practice. It was becoming almost impossible, said Simba, for non-South Africans to join South African academia due to ongoing "ring-fencing of academic space": "... what is happening ... is a hierarchisation of the 'better black'" and even within that inclusion, "there is a black person that the labour policies preferred, and by doing so we start seeing the pushing out and exclusion of foreign nationals."

South Africans are thus still ill-prepared for globalisation, competitive job markets and professional mobility required by transnational academia. Buhlungu observed that:

We need to expand and diversify the range of non-locals to go beyond the two dominant countries (Zimbabwe and Nigeria) and bring in scholars from across Africa, and to also bring in more Indians and whites to help end black to black xenophobia.

The global opportunities now available to the educated professional classes, including South Africans, need to be better understood.

Internationalisation policies are key to growth, as Kalula pointed out in offering the example of Malaysia and Singapore. On dividing into two separate states in 1965, the internationalisation policy of Singapore's National University of Singapore led to the university thriving through the recruitment of expatriate lecturers and becoming one of the highest-ranked institutions in Asia. In contrast, the University of Malaya stagnated by rejecting non-local faculty and becoming inward-looking. In Africa, many of the top universities became shadows of their former selves once they severed their links with their parent institutions located in the colonial metropolises. "No university in the world has ever become a global centre of academic and research excellence through nativist thinking in its academic appointments policy," said Jansen. But if nativism is pursued, then "We might as well be a church, mosque or synagogue based on faith or allegiance." As Jansen points out, some South African universities

would quite literally fall apart were it not for other African academics willing to work in rural areas and uphold their academic programmes in everything from undergraduate teaching to postgraduate supervision and, of course, senior administration.

The building of a strong local pool in a fair and non-prejudicial manner is not easy because this requires the remedying of the reluctance of South Africans to work at geographically remote campuses.

Concluded Simba: "Our [South African] colleagues should create space for African foreign nationals, to allow for different experiences, different ideas, different accents, different skin tones, different kinds of black, different kinds of academics...." To achieve this, African foreign nationals, suggested Kalula, should be encouraged "to apply their trade in the interests of South Africa":

You South Africans are very angry people. You are angry against each other. You are angry against foreigners and even one politician in his lucid moment characterised this xenophobia as self-hate. This history is self-destructive, a lost dream, so foreign academics must come here to help in the South African mission, rather than 'taking over', or thinking of themselves as substitutes.

One potential benefit of travelling academics pollinating our shores is recovery of the 1990s 'going global' dream. Let's now identify some affirmative possibilities of internationalisation towards this goal.

Internationalisation

Having discussed attraction factors over the past 30 years with my own international African students – who populated about half of my Centre's graduate student complement at UKZN – they explained that South Africa is a Europe next door for Southern African Development Community countries, in that its universities offer affordable access to top quality academic programmes, technology, resources and libraries. For me, and as reported at a UKZN corporate relations conference over a decade ago, there are many benefits that international students and academics bring to South African institutions, including:

- Wider understandings of their respective conditions to South Africans who tend to be ignorant of Africa.
- Foreign African graduates return home and often establish similar programmes in their own universities. They then draw on South Africans as external examiners, collaborate with them on pan-African research projects, and send on their own students to do graduate work at the South African institution that hosted them.
- International students bring a political stability to class discussions, and a maturity of purpose to their studies.
- International students show high initiative, take responsibility for their own learning, time and finances, and they are self-motivated. They become our teachers and add significant value to the classroom.
- International collaboration is best driven by academics themselves. International offices are the facilitators, the ambassadors; the cooperating academics are the drivers, the international lecturers are the advisors, and the benefit is institutional.
- International offices are not just administrative ventures gobbling up scarce resources. They are income generators, the global recruitment arms of a university. A university's business plans should indicate how return on investment will occur over specific periods.

An international university needs more than international hotels and toilets. It needs international students and staff, international visitors and international research collaborations. But Marina Waruru's⁵ take-away of the Roundtable concluded that:

The presence of xenophobic practices in South Africa's higher learning institutions can be blamed on a lack of strong leadership in the universities, which has turned a blind eye on the vice by allowing expediency to prevail over merit.

Leadership is key, but it has to get buy-in from all sectors of the academy. Fortunately, observes Simba, "From my experience I can, however, say that students are open, want to learn and do not care about your origin." In contrast, she suggests: "Our colleagues, though, are not as accommodating, and there are some who are pushing for a policy change so that universities do not employ foreign academics."

We are living in a global world and global job markets and we local South Africans can also become global citizens pursuing international career opportunities. We do not have to be angry; we certainly should not be killing each other over finite resources, and we should be growing our wealth rather than squandering it through corruption.

Why is this difficult to understand? Positive intercultural values indeed are what we should be teaching in the academy, in schools and in kindergartens. That was the underlying message of the Roundtable.

The recording of the Roundtable at which these issues were discussed is available here: <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11911/260>



Competing interests

I have no competing interests to declare.

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