

Exploring the Inequalities and Experiences of International Students Through a Postcolonial Lens

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Abstract

Student mobility has become a key component of the internationalisation of higher education. While it offers numerous benefits, international students continue to face critical challenges that reinforce global inequalities and colonial legacies. This qualitative study draws on postcolonial theory to examine the experiences of international students at two universities in Ghana. It focuses on both full-degree and credit-transfer students. Participants were selected using snowball and convenience sampling techniques, and data were collected primarily through interviews. Findings indicate that most participants viewed the academic environment positively. Lecturers were described as approachable, supportive and knowledgeable. Socially and culturally, many students reported positive experiences. However, challenges such as limited interaction with local students and the high cost of living were frequently mentioned. Some experiences also reflected lingering colonial dynamics within academic practices, including perceptions of preferential and hierarchical treatment of students. Universities should strive to address these challenges. As they work to enhance international students' experiences, it is essential for them to remain vigilant against turning student mobility into yet another postcolonial tool that perpetuates historical inequalities.

Key words: international students, experiences, higher education, postcolonialism, qualitative methodology.

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Résumé

La mobilité étudiante est devenue un élément clé de l'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur. Bien qu'elle offre de nombreux avantages, les étudiants internationaux continuent de faire face à des défis majeurs qui renforcent les inégalités mondiales et les héritages coloniaux. Cependant, une grande partie des recherches visant à améliorer l'expérience des étudiants internationaux s'est concentrée sur les pays occidentaux, accordant une attention limitée aux étudiants issus de contextes non occidentaux. Cette étude qualitative s'appuie sur la théorie postcoloniale pour examiner les expériences des étudiants internationaux dans deux universités du Ghana. Elle porte à la fois sur les étudiants inscrits à un cursus complet et sur ceux bénéficiant d'un transfert de crédits. Les participants ont été sélectionnés à l'aide de techniques d'échantillonnage en boule de neige et de commodité, et les données ont été recueillies principalement par le biais d'entretiens. Les résultats indiquent que la plupart des participants percevaient l'environnement universitaire de manière positive. Les enseignants ont été décrits comme accessibles, encourageants et compétents. Sur le plan social et culturel, de nombreux étudiants ont fait état d'expériences positives. Cependant, des difficultés telles que le manque d'interaction avec les étudiants locaux et le coût de la vie élevé ont été fréquemment mentionnées. Certaines expériences reflétaient également la persistance de dynamiques coloniales au sein des pratiques universitaires, notamment la perception d'un traitement préférentiel et hiérarchique des étudiants. Les universités devraient s'efforcer de relever ces défis. Alors qu'elles s'attachent à améliorer l'expérience des étudiants internationaux, il est essentiel qu'elles veillent à ne pas transformer la mobilité étudiante en un énième outil postcolonial qui perpétue les inégalités historiques.

Mots-clés: étudiants internationaux ; expériences ; enseignement supérieur ; postcolonialisme ; méthodologie qualitative.

Introduction

Student mobility has become a critical component of the internationalisation of higher education (HE). It serves not only as a key indicator of campus diversity but also as a major source of revenue for both destination countries and host institutions (Jones, 2017). However, alongside its benefits, student mobility has increasingly become a site of exploitation, perpetuating inequality (Lomer, et. al. 2023) and reinforcing colonial legacies. Colonial legacies refer to the enduring political, economic, social, and cultural effects of colonialism on formerly colonised countries. These legacies shape institutions, identities, and global relationships in ways that continue to impact development, governance, inequality, and cultural expression (Majee & Ress, 2020).

In response to these issues, a growing body of research has emerged aimed at improving international student experiences. However, much of this scholarship has focused on Western contexts (e.g., Findlay, et.al, 2010; Jones, 2017) and primarily on full-degree students.

We contend that all students who transition across national and institutional boundaries, regardless of the context, duration, or classification, encounter significant academic and socio-cultural challenges (Jones, 2017). These challenges have a profound impact on their overall experiences and well-being. Therefore, any higher education institution that recruits international students, irrespective of their number, status, or programme type, must be committed to understanding and addressing the specific needs and experiences of this diverse student population.

Ghana has emerged as a popular destination for international students, particularly from neighboring African countries (Gyamera, 2015). Despite this growing trend, there is still limited literature on the experiences of international students in Ghana. This study addresses this gap by drawing on data collected from two Ghanaian universities to explore the lived experiences of international students and how they interpret these experiences. The research specifically investigates their academic and socio-cultural encounters, as well as the challenges they face.

The paper is organised into five sections: the introduction, a review of relevant literature, the methodology, findings and discussion, and finally, the recommendations and conclusion.

Literature review

Conceptualising the International Student

The term international student has been conceptualised in various ways across policy and academic literature. UNESCO defines an international student as an individual who has physically crossed an international border to engage in educational activities in a host country, with the educational experience differing from that available in their country of origin (UNESCO, 2015). Similarly, the Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of higher education in England, defines international students as “students from outside the UK who come to study at institutions in England, or who study with English institutions at local campuses or via distance learning while resident abroad” (Office for Students, 2022). In general, international students are typically classified as individuals holding non-resident visa status who pursue tertiary or higher education degrees in a destination country (Knight, 2012).

International students can be grouped into different categories. First, there are students who enrol in full-degree programmes abroad. These individuals complete an entire degree at a foreign institution and are awarded the qualification by the host institution (Ibid.). Another category includes credit-mobile students. These involve students who remain enrolled in their home institutions while they earn transferrable credits through short-term study abroad programmes. They typically spend one semester or a year at a foreign institution, with their degrees ultimately conferred by their home universities (Bista, 2019; Knight, 2012). They are often excluded from the definition of “international students” (Awuor, 2021).

There are also cross-border collaborative degree programmes. These involve partnerships between two or more institutions or providers. In these programmes, students register for an academic programme jointly offered by multiple institutions. This often leads to dual or jointly awarded degrees (ibid.).

Experiences of International Students

International students have multifaceted experiences that span personal, social, professional, national, cultural, and familial dimensions (Jones, 2017). These could both positive and negative impacts on them.

On a personal level, international mobility contributes significantly to students’ development by enhancing analytical skills, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Jones, 2017). The challenges students encounter in foreign universities often push them beyond their comfort zone. This fosters resilience, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. Socially, students gain opportunities for social networking to form lasting friendships. Exchange programmes create rich environments for developing international connections, which may serve both personal and professional purposes (Ibid). Professionally, international exposure can significantly shape and improve career trajectories. Such experiences foster transformative thinking and a commitment to equitable and justice-oriented practices in the workplace (Mansouri et al., 2017, p. 7). Exposure to diverse professional environments prompts critical reflection, which can enhance the student’s own approach to work.

Culturally, studying abroad deepens students’ self-awareness and promotes an appreciation of multiculturalism. These experiences often lead to the development of global awareness, understood as critical knowledge of global systems and one’s interconnectedness and solidarity with others (Mansouri et al., 2017).

Challenges

Despite the numerous benefits of international student mobility, international students often face significant academic, cultural, social, and economic challenges that can lead to culture shock (Jones, 2017; Ward, et. al., 2004). Culture shock is defined as “a crisis characterised by feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and anxiety [that goes]... hand-in-hand with the realization that the new environment may be ‘difficult’ and requires considerable effort to negotiate” (Ward et al., 2004, p. 187). Academically, international students bring diverse values, expectations, and perspectives into the classroom. However, these contributions are often overlooked or undervalued by lecturers, which can exacerbate students’ academic struggles.

Language barriers also represent a major hurdle, particularly when students are unfamiliar with accents, colloquialisms, or academic jargon in the host country (Jones, 2017). These difficulties affect students’ ability to read, write, comprehend lectures, and actively participate in classroom discussions.

They may also be confronted with cultural and religious differences that influence daily life, academic engagement, and social interaction. Conflicts may arise due to differing taboos, gender norms, lifestyle expectations, and sexual mores (Cooper, 2016). These tensions can manifest in anxiety, stress, fatigue, and even depression.

In spite of these challenges, many institutions continue to focus heavily on strategic plans to attract international students without commensurate investment in the structures needed to support their integration and well-being (Jones, 2017). Support services are often underdeveloped, and student diversity is not always met with tailored or differentiated support mechanisms.

Institutions continue to view international students primarily through an economic lens. They are perceived as revenue sources, rather than as individuals with complex lived realities, who face a range of challenges. This instrumental view persists regardless of whether the students originate from Asia, Europe, Africa, or the Americas (Bista, 2019, p. 5).

Many of these challenges are often linked to colonial legacies. Students from ex colonial countries often face greater marginalisations and discriminations. Researchers, challenge the notion of the university as a neutral or ideologically innocent space. Student mobility, although often celebrated, can reproduce colonial patterns of exclusion (Lee, et., 2017). There have been increasing calls to decolonise international students’

experiences by addressing the structural inequalities that mirror historically uneven power relations and colonial legacies (Ibid).

Institutional and Individual Strategies to Combat Challenges

The challenges mostly are addressed from both the institutional and individual levels.

Individual Strategies

Tran and Vu (2018) introduce the concept of agency in mobility. The concept underscores that international students are not merely passive recipients of global education experiences but active agents who shape their trajectories. They exercise strategic self-determination in navigating campus climates, institutional structures, and the broader socio-cultural contexts of their host environments.

On an individual level, students employ various coping strategies to manage these challenges. Many seek friendships with domestic students and members of the local community as a way of gaining insight into the host culture and building a support network (Lee & Ahn, 2013). Others connect with peers who share similar cultural backgrounds. These relationships foster a sense of belonging and offer emotional support to manage the stresses of cross-cultural adjustment (ibid).

Institutionally, higher education institutions must recognise that international students are not a homogenous group, even when they come from the same country. There is considerable diversity among international students in terms of cultural background, academic preparation, socio-economic status, and personal experiences (Jones, 2017). Consequently, institutions should develop differentiated support services aimed at promoting equity and inclusion. However, differentiation should not equate to preferential treatment. Services must be equitable, not discriminatory or exclusive. Preferential treatment based on race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender, whether explicit or implicit, should be avoided entirely.

Unfortunately, many institutions continue to privilege students from Western countries while offering limited support or concern for students from other regions, particularly from the Global South (Tannock, 2013). This practice perpetuates global inequalities and reflects the enduring influence of colonial hierarchies in contemporary higher education. The legacy of European colonialism continues to shape dominant discourses and institutional practices in international education. This reinforces power asymmetries that marginalise non-Western perspectives and experiences (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Zeleza, 2009).

To address these challenges, institutions must commit to providing non-discriminatory, inclusive student services that prioritise the well-being and dignity of international students. This calls for a shift toward humanizing internationalisation.

Humanizing Internationalisation

This is an approach that values international students as individuals with the capacity to contribute meaningfully to transnational education. Rather than viewing students through an economic or colonial lens (Lomer, et. al. 2023), institutions are expected to recognise them as human beings with rights, aspirations, and lived experiences. Central to this framework is the well-being of international students, with care acting as a foundational principle (Deuchar & Gorur, 2023). Well-being extends beyond academic success to include a sense of belonging, respect, recognition, and appreciation.

Humanising internationalisation also places inclusivity at the centre of international education. It ensures that diverse populations, including historically marginalised groups, have equitable access to global learning opportunities. Such inclusive practices contribute to the creation of a more just and equitable world.

At its core, this approach requires a critical examination of the dominance of Western knowledge systems in higher education. This commitment to epistemic diversity challenges the privileging of Western paradigms and dominant educational norms that often marginalise non-Western voices.

The Study

This qualitative study is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants involved undergraduate and graduate international students from various disciplinary backgrounds including Population Studies, Humanities, and African Studies.

The methodological approach enabled a comprehensive collection of in-depth insights (Silverman, 2024) into the lived experiences of international students. The institutions were purposively selected based on feasibility, age and size. University A is a large institution with a strong international reputation (Times Higher Education, 2020). It is located in Accra and is one of the oldest universities in Ghana. The university's vision is to become a research-intensive, world-class institution (Institutional Strategic Report, 2014–2024). University B is also a reputable public university, though smaller in scale than University A. Although its original focus was on national and sub-regional capacity building, the university has since broadened its programmes and outreach to attract students globally. Its current strategic

objective is to reposition itself in the international arena (Institutional Strategic Plan, 2018).

We utilised convenience and snowball sampling techniques due to challenges in reaching international students. Those who volunteered to participate were interviewed and, in turn, they introduced us to other international students.

Most of the graduate students were enrolled in regionally-focused programmes such as the Public Sector Management Training Programme (PSMTP), the West Africa Centre for Crop Improvement (WACCI), and the Regional Institute for Population Studies (RIPS). These programmes operate under regional mandates and follow recruitment policies that admit students from across the sub-region, often based on specific funding conditions.

Details of Student Participants
University A

Institution	Number of students	Duration of programme	Age brackets
Undergraduate			
Canada	3	One year	18–25
USA	8	One year	18–25
Nigeria	12	Four years (Full time)	
Graduate			
Cameroon	1	One year Master's	25–30
South Africa	1	One year Master's	25–30
Kenya	1	One year Master's	25–30
Sierra Leone	1	One year Master's	25–30
Total	27		

University B

Institution	Number of students	Duration of programme	Age brackets
Undergraduate			
Spain	3	One semester	19–22
France	3	One semester	19–22
Nigeria	10	Four-year programme	
Graduate			
Liberia	10	One year master's	25–30
Nigeria	3	One year master's	25–30
Total	29		

We collected the data primarily through face-to-face group interviews. In a few cases, individual interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person. These were necessary for participants who were not in Accra at the time of data collection, including those who had returned to their home countries for holidays. The use of both individual and group interviews did not affect the overall quality of the data.

Students were asked to share their experiences as international students in Ghanaian universities. The study included both students pursuing full-degree programmes and those engaged in short-term programmes, such as one-semester or year-abroad experiences. All students were included because, as Bista (2019) noted, “whether we call it ‘study abroad’ or ‘overseas study,’ students are constantly pursuing their dreams of studying in a foreign country” (p. 4). There is therefore a need to understand the experiences of all categories of international students. The study also considered students from both African and non-African countries.

The nationalities of participants were highlighted to underscore the point that international students are not limited to those from non-African countries (Bista, 2019). Students from African countries are also international students

and should be afforded the necessary support. Presenting the nationalities of participants also helps to identify the countries from which Ghanaian universities typically attract their international student population. Moreover, participants’ nationalities were found to have a significant influence on their experiences.

We analysed the data manually using thematic and content analysis. These were applied to both full-time and short-stay students.

Although the experiences of full-degree and short-term students may differ, they were treated equally in the analysis to reinforce the notion that all are international students, regardless of the duration of their stay.

This study was informed by postcolonial theory. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002, p. 2) use the term post-colonisation to refer to all cultures affected by colonisation, from the time of its practice to the present. This theoretical perspective addresses key issues in higher education, such as the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies, persistent inequalities and exclusions, and the enduring legacies of colonialism in international academic discourse. Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens through which the experiences of international students can be interrogated.

Ethical Considerations

We emphasised key ethical considerations such as obtaining voluntary informed consent and ensuring confidentiality and privacy (Silverman, 2021). Given the sensitivity of some of the issues raised by international students, we ensured all identifying information including names of participants or host institutions has been disclosed.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, with a particular focus on the academic and social experiences of international students.

Academic Experiences of Students

To strengthen their international appeal, several Ghanaian universities have expanded their academic offerings beyond their original mandates (Gyamera, 2014). The institutions now provide a wide range of programmes including postgraduate taught, research-based, sandwich, and PhD degrees for international students. Typically, international students select from existing course offerings available during a given semester, rather than requesting new courses to be created for them.

The curriculum across the institutions is largely Western-oriented. Instruction is delivered almost exclusively in English, with no academic programmes offered in other foreign or local languages. For students from non-English-speaking countries, language proficiency programmes are mandatory. At University A, a one-year in-house English proficiency programme is available, whereas University B refers such students to private language institutions upon request.

Nonetheless, most participants across both institutions, disciplines, and academic levels reported a high level of satisfaction with the quality of lectures and instruction they received.

Openness and Transparency

One of the key strengths, students highlighted, was the openness and transparency of lecturers:

I liked the fact that...the lecturers were very open...I mean, if you go to class, the lecturers are very eloquent... (Nelson, undergraduate, University B).

One thing I love about me taking the decision to come to (Institution) is the support you get from the lecturers. In as much as they teach, they go outside the box to teach us about everyday life which prepares you for the future.

Lecturer transparency refers to the clarity and openness with which lecturers communicate course expectations, assessment criteria, learning outcomes, and feedback mechanisms (Winkelmess et al., 2016). Transparent instruction is especially critical for international students, as it helps them understand academic norms and expectations, thereby reducing confusion and anxiety.

Interactive Engagement with Lecturers

Another strength is interactive engagement with lecturers:

In [country of origin] my classes are not too interactive, so I turn to slack off a bit but here sometimes they give us work every week...and there are discussions.

...there's a real exchange between the student and the lecturer and that's very nice (Nelson, undergraduate, University B).

Interactive teaching approaches, such as discussion-based classes, collaborative projects, and inquiry-driven activities, create opportunities for

active engagement. They enable students to make sense of their education personally and academically. Such pedagogical practices also foster deeper learning and intercultural dialogue.

Efficiency of Lecturers

Participants also perceived the lecturers as efficient:

I see that lecturers are young, but they are well-versed in their area of specialty, and these are the people when they teach you and you leave the shores of Ghana, you can make an impact (Tudu, graduate, University B).

Fantastic tutorials, 90% average is what I can apportion because over the years, the lectures I met demonstrate a high level of professionalism (Sarah, graduate, University A).

Opportunities to Collaborate with Local Students

Students also highlighted the enriched nature of the teaching and learning experience, particularly through opportunities to collaborate with local students. Such interactions not only facilitated deeper academic engagement but also promoted intercultural understanding and peer learning.

My interaction with local students in my class has been enriching. I could collaborate on group projects, exchange ideas, and learn from their perspectives on various topics related to public sector management.

Interaction with local students at the institution has been positive overall. I have found them to be supportive, respectful and willing to share their experiences and insights with international students like me.

The impact of the learning environment on student well-being has been widely emphasised in the literature. Brooker and Vu (2020) found that positive academic experiences, such as class discussions, active participation and study groups significantly contribute to students' overall well-being. Similarly,

Social-cultural Experiences

In line with the International Charter for Health Promoting Universities, there is a growing recognition of the importance of prioritizing students' well-being as a core aspect of higher education. Most participants in this study expressed satisfaction with their social and cultural experiences. The following excerpts are illustrative of their typical experiences:

Friendliness of People

Here, people are more sociable...and...they really want to know how you're doing...and they genuinely want to be a friend. (Charlotte, Undergraduate, University B).

But after they have become comfortable around you, that's when you start to see their cheerful nature (Tudu, graduate student, University B).

Polite and Helpful

Ghanaians are generally described as patriotic, polite, kind, and generous:

Here everybody is down to help one another. If I go to town and I get lost...someone will approach me and something like, 'oh you are completely lost, should I help you find your way? And they will take their time of their day and really walk with me to show me where the location is (Kemi, graduate student, University A).

They are very helpful with no expectation of anything (Alice, undergraduate, University B).

Their reflections highlight the positive aspects of integration, cultural exchange, and social support systems. Social experiences have a positive impact on students (Brooker and Vu, 2020). It facilitates international students' social integration, reduce cultural shock, and promote a sense of belonging.

Challenges

Some participants encountered challenges that significantly impacted both their academic and social experiences. This section explores these challenges in greater detail.

Miscommunication

Some participants expressed concerns about language barriers that led to instances of miscommunication.

...at times there is miscommunication and people don't study the same thing (Rio, undergraduate, University A).

Psychologically, sometimes I don't feel happy because of the insecurity and the language barrier.

Miscommunication, sometimes, has a negative impact on both academic and social experiences. For example, Rio recounted a situation where, due to a misunderstanding of instructions, he submitted an assignment that exceeded the required length, writing five pages instead of one. On another occasion, he wrote only one page when five were expected. These miscommunications affected his academic confidence and performance.

Excessive Use of Local Languages

The language barrier was further compounded by the frequent use of local languages both within and beyond the classroom. This practice often excluded international students from academic discussions and everyday conversations, leading to feelings of isolation and marginalization. The inability to participate fully in such interactions limited their opportunities for engagement, networking, and cultural integration.

...in class, you see Ghanaians speaking Twi and sometimes lecturers speak Twi before they interpret it in English and that is not a good experience for a foreign student...even if we are to brainstorm on some questions in class they would have to do it in Twi before they speak the English language and that aspect is not good for me (Kowshi, Masters student, University B).

Particularly when it comes to political stuff in the class, and people are arguing about different parties and stuff, it was over my head (Angie, University B).

As for these people, they are always speaking in their language wo we are not always understanding (Agnes, University A).

However, some participants noted that local students and lecturers occasionally translated conversations or lecture content delivered in Twi into English.

...if they are explaining in Twi and we don't get it, they try to explain it in English (Joyce, undergraduate, University B).

Language continues to pose a significant barrier for international students (Wong & Hyde, 2024). Many students struggle with understanding, navigating unfamiliar accents, engaging in classroom discourse, and participating in informal social interactions (ibid). These challenges not only hinder their academic engagement but also contribute to feelings of social exclusion and isolation.

Handling of Sensitive Topics

While students from neighbouring African countries did not express specific concerns, several exchange students raised issues regarding the handling of sensitive topics in the classroom. This is particularly, in relation to sexual orientation and religion. The findings revealed that some lecturers and local students adopted attitudes and postures that made international students uncomfortable during discussions on these subjects. Particularly, discussions on sexuality often lacked sensitivity. While some lecturers avoided the topic altogether, others introduced it either deliberately or as part of the lecture content. This offered the opportunity to openly criticise individuals with non-heteronormative sexual orientations, especially homosexuals.

Another point of concern was the frequent use of the Bible as a reference during lectures. Students from other African countries did not raise concerns, perhaps due to the fact that many African countries are predominantly Christian (Statista, 2022).

Yes, a lot of them [use] references from the Bible etc (Nelson, University B).

I will be in class, and a lecturer will ask a question and someone will give an answer with a Bible quote or something of that sort, but back in America that's impossible. (Ronnie, University A).

Integrating of African Knowledge Systems

Participants expressed mixed views regarding the integration of African knowledge systems into the curriculum. While a few students acknowledged efforts to incorporate African culture and values into the academic environment, the majority, particularly exchange students and some graduate students, voiced concerns about their limited presence in the lecture room. However, these systems are significant for the academic experiences of international students. Some students are attracted to African universities specifically to engage with indigenous knowledge (Gyamera, 2024).

I feel like they weren't emphasised in the curriculum, but they were facilitated through discussions. I think there were a lot of conversations...there were like good comparisons between African values and others like American or Western values and how these are in conflict (Patricia, University B).

Some lecturers made some examples and case studies about Ghana but also, I think a lot of lecturers did theories, that's why there weren't many examples on Africa and there were no

examples on Ghana either. Even African history, we didn't learn Ghanaian history. (Lucas, University B).

Long Hours of Lectures

While undergraduate participants, both African and non-African, did not raise concerns regarding lecture schedules, most graduate students expressed dissatisfaction with the intensity and scheduling of their courses. Many reported that the long hours of lectures, resulted in fatigue and adversely affected their mental health:

When I first came to the University, I went to class on Sunday and sat for more than nine hours, I think that the brain gets weak. If you sit for more than two hours, which I'm used to, you get stressed up, and for you to sit for nine hours is something else. And, to be honest, it's mentally stressful, I mean because even sometimes on Saturdays you go to lectures at 9 am, and you come end at 9 pm. (Kuwor, Graduate, University B).

For me, I feel it's very intense, in my understanding all master's programmes in Ghana are one year and the student doesn't get time to breathe. I believe in mental health, so what's reflected to me is that perhaps the country has not caught up with what the world is doing (Naomi, graduate, University A).

The deterioration of mental health among students in higher education has become a growing concern (Hartrey et al., 2017). Some causes of mental health include extended duration of lectures, and academic pressures, including assignments and tight deadlines. These contribute significantly to both emotional and physical stress for many students, leading to fatigue and frustration. These affect not only academic performance but also overall personal well-being.

Limited Opportunities for Local–International Student Interaction

Although many participants expressed satisfaction with their social and cultural experiences, a significant number, particularly those at University B, highlighted that these experiences primarily occurred off-campus:

I think my expectations were fully met, in terms of culture, in terms of experience, but it was mostly outside of the school. It was great. I like the city, the music, the travels I've done, that was fun and nice, but mostly outside of the school. (Nelson, Undergraduate, University B).

...so for the past few months, I got there I did find it very hard to make friends on campus But as I stuck to myself it became a lot easier and I also started to meet a lot of people outside of class, like in my area, friends of friends (Lizzy, undergraduate, exchange student, University B).

Limited interaction with local students remains a persistent challenge for international students (Pagliarello, 2023). This lack of engagement often fosters a sense of otherness, social isolation, and loneliness, which undermine the holistic international student experience. It hampers opportunities for meaningful cultural immersion, which is a critical aspect of international education.

Some participants attributed the limited interaction to a lack of awareness or orientation programmes aimed at informing local students about the presence and needs of international students:

A Ghanaian once asked me: 'Why did you choose Ghana instead of South Africa?' But I was thinking you should be happy that I chose Ghana. (Saaj, graduate, University A).

It was never mean excerpt that I would pass them, and they would be looking at me and saying hi oboroni, oburoni [White person], you know. I must say sometimes, it is a bit frustrating because some of them know I have been on campus for months now and still every day I walk past them and they will have the same, reaction and I will be like it's been weeks since I have been here and why are you surprised? I don't think, it was explained why we were here. Everyone I was talking with, it was like why are you here, are you a teacher? But I think nobody told them that there were going to be international students (Nelson, undergraduate, University B).

Participants observed that many local students seemed unaware of the significance of having international students on campus. Although this challenge was expressed across all institutions, it was reported to be less pronounced at University A.

Lack of Entertainment on Campus

The limited availability of entertainment further intensified the issue of social isolation. This concern was particularly emphasised by students at University B. They increasingly emphasised the absence of on-campus recreational activities or events.

Also, one thing that did disappoint me was I think because ... [University B] was quite small there is still very small student life and there are few associations (George, University B, graduate student).

Social life is very poor. There is very limited entertainment (Godwin, Undergraduate student, University A.).

The psychological adjustment and social integration of international students are often hindered by limited opportunities for interaction with domestic students (Jones, 2017). Social activities offer shared, non-verbal contexts through which international students can observe, engage, and build natural connections with peers (Ibid).

Food Accessibility and Cultural Preferences

Another concern raised by participants, particularly those at University B, was the limited availability of food, particularly, in the evenings. They also found difficulty in accessing culturally familiar meals. Even when food was available, the cost was often prohibitive. The inability to access familiar cuisine, compounded by the high cost of local meals, posed a significant challenge to their overall wellbeing and cultural adjustment Bhanu Pilli and Slater (2021).

At... [University B], once the canteen is closed you hardly get food to buy. So, we would be grateful if management could think in that direction, I mean centres to entertain or recreational centres so we can relax during holidays (Hawa, University B, graduate student).

If ...[University B] can work on the facilities so that we get places where we can cook on our own. For Liberians, we love our taste, and we love to cook for ourselves (Yao, University B, graduate student).

University A offers a range of services, including large and vibrant markets and shops that cater to the needs of both domestic and international students. Many international students reported being able to access a variety of food options, including some that reflect their culinary preferences.

Perceived Preferential and Hierarchical Treatment

A recurring concern raised by many African students, both undergraduate and graduate, was the perception of preferential or hierarchical treatment favouring exchange students, particularly those from Western countries. We explain preferential treatment, in this context, as situations in which

students from Europe and North America are perceived to receive greater attention or care. Hierarchical treatment reflects the perceived differential valuing of students based on their country of origin or racial identity.

Some participants interpreted the disparity in treatment through a racial lens, pointing to the continued privileging of White bodies in academic and social spaces. One Nigerian student, during participant recruitment, encapsulated this sentiment. When I approached her to take part in the study, and after I explained the aim of capturing the experiences of international students, she gestured towards a white student seated across the room and said:

Ask her, she has a lot to say... they treat them differently, you know the skin colour. Those of us here nobody cares.

This comment speaks to a deeper sense of marginalisation and invisibility felt by some African students. It raises critical questions about how internationalisation is practised and perceived in some Ghanaian higher education institutions.

Many of the White students interviewed acknowledged that considerable efforts were made by institutional staff to ensure their comfort and satisfaction. The preferential treatment is not only limited to the campuses but even in the local communities:

In the community...people tend to put White international students on a high pedestal ...and I think people get used to the way they're treated, and they seek to operate in it like superiority... and I think there's a big legacy of colonialism in Africa. (Nelson, undergraduate, University B).

I definitely think that white people have an advantage... if you go out to a restaurant for example, you see like every waitress approaches a White person first...the Blacks, attention is not on them...and like if we went to clubs, guys would approach White women more than other people.

After whites, Black Americans are the next to be treated better.

I'm treated very well, although I'm Black, people see my skin, and complexion and they can deduce that I'm not from an African country. (Ava, Undergraduate, University A).

I feel colonial legacies are very, very, ingrained here from my perspectives because I feel sometimes like people will not pay

attention to me until I speak and they say, wow, I thought... and all of sudden they will change their whole attitude which I feel like... very terrible to me.

In contrast, several African students reiterated the forms of discrimination they encountered, both on campus and within the broader community. These experiences ranged from subtle exclusions in classroom interactions and administrative processes to overt acts of bias in public spaces. This reinforces their sense of marginalisation and 'otherness'.

What I enjoyed least is the perceptions of Ghanaians towards Nigerians. Ghanaians assume that Nigerians are criminals, violence and fraudulent but this cannot be right, I do not like it at all (Chinedu, Nigerian Student leader).

I have my closest friend, we met at [Institution] and she's from... [An African country]. She has a very different experience than me...they treat African foreign students differently than if you're from other parts of the world. ... (Patricia, Undergraduate, University B).

These findings corroborate a growing body of research revealing that international students experience discriminatory treatment along lines of race and ethnicity within host institutions. For example, Lee, et. al., (2017) found that compared to students from Europe, North America, and other regions, non-Caucasian students, particularly those from the Global South, reported more significant hardships and instances of discrimination.

We interpret such unequal experiences as manifestations of enduring colonial legacies. Fanon (2008) illustrates how colonial ideologies foster internalised inferiority among Black people, influencing their interactions with White and non-White individuals alike. He asserts that a Black person behaves differently in the presence of a White person than with another Black person—an outcome of colonial conditioning and the internalisation of racial hierarchies (pp. 3–8). These dynamics persist in contemporary educational settings, subtly shaping interactions, power relations, and institutional cultures.

Support Systems

In spite of the challenges, there appears to be limited support system for students. When we asked students about support systems, they provide some of these typical responses:

Our faculty don't really get involved when it comes to that aspect. It's only about school and studying for them.

Honestly, I don't receive any service, and I think because I don't ask for any.

However, some participants suggested that some of the lecturers serve as supportive system for the students.

I had to go for counselling in one of the experience lecturer's offices.

There have been mixed arguments about the role of institutions in achieving student well-being. McLachlan and Justice (2009) posit that students must achieve well-being primarily through their own efforts. They gave limited attention given to the structural inequities, such as racism, marginalisation, and power dynamics, that shape the international student experience. Similarly, Tseng and Newton (2002) argue that international students must negotiate acculturative stressors using personal coping mechanisms. They, however, acknowledge the systemic pressures present in academic and social environments.

All the institutions involved in this study have formal support systems, such as counselling, health facilities, and international offices. However, most participants indicated limited engagement with these services. This may be due to unawareness, mistrust, cultural stigma, or the perception that such services are not tailored to their specific needs.

Integration Strategies and Student Agency

In exercising this agency, international students adopt a variety of strategies to cope with the academic, social, and emotional challenges they encounter. These include both proactive and adaptive approaches to overcoming structural barriers such as language difficulties, institutional bias, and cultural unfamiliarity (Tran & Vu, 2018).

Participants in this study demonstrated various ways of exercising agency and resilience.

Maintaining Contact with Family and Friends

A central emotional coping strategy students used to adapt to the situation is maintaining contact with family members remains. Participants often rely on frequent communication with family to maintain a sense of continuity and support:

I get in touch with my family every day, via WhatsApp calls, text messages, and video call.

Students also shared their reliance on friends. They formed friendships at recreational locations, such as swimming pools, and through class interactions:

Yes, I have been able to make a lot of friends in class, and most often I go to the swimming pool and make friends there also.

Developing Close Relationship with Countrymen

Some participants explained that they preferred interacting with their country people. This was particularly with Nigerian students:

I prefer to communicate with my fellow Nigerians where the vibes would flow, and it will be just simple (Augustina, Nigerian undergraduate female).

My social life is with my Nigerian friends, my boyfriend, and church, that is it.

One of the most prominent strategies was the forging of strong connections with individuals from similar cultural backgrounds (Tran & Vu, 2018).. These peer-based networks became critical spaces for support, identity reinforcement, and navigating both academic and social life.

Developing a Strong Sense of Purpose

A strong sense of purpose and personal vision also emerged as key drivers of resilience. Several participants expressed that their long-term goals served as a source of motivation:

I don't really know, but the only thing I can say is my vision of becoming an ambassador. That is the only thing I use to make myself happy in stressful moments.

Lee and Ahn (2013) similarly found that some students maintain optimism by focusing on the main reasons for pursuing international education. This future-oriented mindset provides psychological stability and helps manage current discomforts.

Engaging in Social Activities

Social activities and cultural exploration play an equally important role. Students engage in excursions and local tourism as a means of cultural immersion and stress relief:

For vacation, as international students, we organise so many excursions just to see or know more about Ghana.

Ultimately, self-determination and resilience emerge as central mechanisms in students' integration journeys. Their ability to respond positively and strategically to challenges reflects a dynamic process of adaptation, transformation, and identity negotiation (Jones, 2017).

This echoes McLachlan and Justice's (2009) assertion that international students should not be viewed merely as passive recipients of support. They should be perceived as individuals who actively generate solutions and demonstrate agency in difficult situations.

Discussion and Implication for Practice

In general, most participants across academic levels, countries of origin, and programmes, expressed satisfaction with their academic experiences. However, there were marked nuances in their social and cultural experiences. Exchange students from non-African countries tended to be highly positive. They often described their experiences as enriching and enjoyable. In contrast, many African international students reported exclusion, discrimination, and social isolation.

This divergence is not surprising. As Ogden (2007) observes, organisers of international study-abroad programmes are under persistent pressure to meet the expectations of students from the Global North. These expectations include the provision of familiar amenities, structured experiences, and a high degree of institutional responsiveness (p. 36). The evidence in this study suggests that institutions expend more effort in meeting the needs of students from non-African countries, often to the neglect of their African counterparts.

This disparity in treatment reveals a problematic hierarchy within internationalisation practices in the institutions. It becomes one that privileges students based on nationality, race, or perceived status. This underscores the persistence of colonial logics and global inequalities within higher education, where the needs and well-being of African students are frequently rendered invisible or secondary (Lee, etc., 2017).

It is also notable that many of the challenges participants face, such as language barriers, limited interaction with local students and high tuition and living costs, mirror those experienced globally. However, in the Ghanaian context, these challenges are compounded by deep-seated colonial residues in the higher education system and broader society.

One of the most persistent colonial legacies is the devaluation of academic institutions in the Global South. As the data reflects, most of the students generally expressed positive academic experiences in the Ghanaian. However, African universities continue to be perceived as offering limited opportunities for academic achievement and intellectual development compared to institutions in the Global North. These perceptions are rooted in colonial hierarchies that framed Western education as superior and African knowledge systems as primitive or irrelevant (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Zeleza, 2009). Such misconceptions are perpetuated today through global rankings, university branding, and international policy discourses. They elevate "world-class" institutions, often Western, while marginalizing African ones.

Another critical marker of colonial legacy is the dominant use of the English as the language of instruction in Ghanaian higher education. Despite increasing discourse around inclusivity and multilingualism in global higher education, English remains unchallenged as the main language of instruction and research globally (Tight, 2022).

Equally concerning is the continued marginalization of African knowledge systems. Since the first encounter between Europe and Africa in the 15th century, Africa has been subjected to profound epistemic violence (Zeleza, 2009). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues, colonial domination emptied African minds of their indigenous knowledge and memories, replacing them with European epistemologies and ontologies. Contemporary internationalisation policies, while ostensibly inclusive, do little to challenge this epistemic asymmetry. On the contrary, most universities have become more deeply embedded in Western academic models, including curriculum design and teaching methodologies. This trend undermines efforts to reposition African universities as autonomous knowledge producers.

Colonial legacies also manifest in the pedagogical practices of lecturers, particularly in the incorporation of Christian doctrine in classrooms and the open expression of negative attitudes towards individuals of diverse sexual orientations. This can be traced to the historical relationship between colonisation and Christian missionary activities. Christianity was introduced to the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) in the late 15th century by Roman Catholic missionaries accompanying Portuguese traders. With formal colonisation, missionary activity intensified and became intertwined with colonial governance and education. As Okon (2008) notes, "Christianity became the religion of civilization and development" (p. 1), positioning it as an essential pillar of colonial hegemony.

Despite Ghana's constitutional commitment to secularism and religious pluralism, Christian rituals, such as public prayers and the use of the Bible, are normalised in educational and public institutions. These practices are rarely seen as infringing on the principle of separation between religion and the state.

Another significant concern illuminated in the study is the perceived preferential treatment of Western international students over their African counterparts. As revealed earlier in the paper, participants across various groups including almost all exchange students observed that students from Western and some Asian countries received better services, more attention, and greater institutional care. African international students, particularly those from neighbouring countries, often faced subtle and overt forms of discrimination. These observations suggest a racialised hierarchy of international students: White students are treated most favourably, followed by Black students from the diaspora (e.g., the United States), and lastly Black students from sub-Saharan Africa, who often remain marginalised. In some instances, this preferential treatment fostered a sense of entitlement among Western students, reinforcing dynamics of superiority.

The preferential treatment echoes the arguments of postcolonial scholars such as Zeleza (2016) that coloniality continues to shape global power relations, including within higher education. Particular is the perception among some Africans that Westerners are inherently superior. This continues to feed into institutional practices, unwittingly reproducing racial hierarchies.

Crucially, this hierarchy is not only enforced by institutional structures but also reinforced by local students and the broader community.

Implications for Practice

Institutions must prioritise international student well-being by improving the scope and responsiveness of student services. No aspect of student welfare should be regarded as trivial. Services should address not only academic needs but also emotional, psychosocial, cultural, and mental health concerns.

The lecture room remains a key space for fostering well-being, belonging, and intercultural awareness. The curriculum should be intentionally designed to promote connection and empathy. It should be devoid of culturally exclusive content or practices, such as privileging one religious perspective over others. There should be equitable recognition of diverse identities, including those based on gender, sexuality, and faith.

Social integration is crucial. There is the need to encourage strong relationship between local and international students. Institutions should intentionally design social and entertainment programmes that include both groups of students. For instance, intercultural events, such as international days should not be limited to international students. This will provide opportunities for international and local students to interact and form stronger relationships.

Significantly, universities must guard against turning student mobility into a postcolonial reproduction of hegemonic structures. Internationalisation efforts should not re-inscribe old hierarchies, but rather promote intercultural responsibility among all students and staff, with structured opportunities to explore, reflect, and engage with cultural difference.

It is deeply concerning that universities, particularly those in Africa, would be perceived to frame international student experiences through racialised and hierarchical lenses. One of the fundamental aspirations of internationalisation is to foster mutual understanding, cultural respect, and global tolerance. For African universities, this mandate carries an added urgency; to disrupt and dismantle colonial legacies and to reshape long-standing misconceptions about Africa and Africans. As Ploner and Nada (2020) argue, international students' presence can have a transformative impact on socio-cultural and political identities both the students and institutions. Whether their experiences reinforce or challenge colonial legacies, depends on how they are received, integrated, and engaged.

International students, whether from Africa or elsewhere, often arrive with open minds, seeking experiences that either affirm or challenge dominant global narratives. African postgraduate students, in particular, tend to approach international education with a transformative agenda. They seek to gain exposure, knowledge, and collaborative networks to combat the persistent effects of colonialism (Gyamera, 2024). Thus, institutional practices that deny them equitable treatment contradict the very spirit of internationalization.

Generally, the reinforcement of colonial hierarchies through unequal support services, preferential treatment, and inaction in the face of student stereotyping defeats the broader purpose of internationalization. It particularly contradicts frameworks of "humanizing internationalization" and student well-being. These are increasingly recognised as foundation to build an inclusive and just global higher education (Lomer, 2023).

We argue that student well-being must be redefined not as a by-product of individual resilience, but as an outcome of structural justice. A justice-oriented, postcolonial approach to internationalisation demands that institutions go beyond the provision of services. It calls for a humanising paradigm, one that foregrounds dignity, agency, and participation. Rethinking international education through this lens means engaging in critical policy reform, enhanced institutional accountability, and a deeper theoretical engagement with decolonial frameworks.

Conclusion

As Ghanaian universities emerge as regional hubs for international education, there is a critical need to design and implement internationalisation strategies that centre the principles of student well-being, decolonial care, and equity. Institutions must scale up their support services not only to enrich students' academic experiences but also their social, cultural experiences. While differentiated care may be necessary to meet diverse student needs, it must never translate into preferential or racially skewed treatment.

International student experiences must not be framed through the lenses of skin colour, nationality. Universities should foster non-colonial, equitable relationships, ensuring that White, Brown, and Black students are treated with equal dignity, respect, and institutional care.

In this context, the decolonisation of teaching and learning becomes essential. This involves challenging dominant narratives, recovering silenced and marginalised knowledges, and embracing more inclusive, open-ended, and multicultural educational practices (Zezeza, 2009). Through sustained research, pedagogical reform, and transformation of institutional cultures, Ghanaian can position themselves not just as participants in global academic networks but as leaders in equitable and transformative internationalization.

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