African University Students in China's Hong Kong: Motivations and Aspirations

by

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Abstract

This paper explores the motivations and aspirations of African students who choose Hong Kong as their destination for university studies. Based on the findings of in-depth interviews with ten African students in Hong Kong, this research postulates that academic reputation and financial incentives are the two main motivations for attending university in Hong Kong. Other factors such as good teaching, research supervision, and treating Hong Kong as a stepping-stone to China also motivate some students. However, this paper identifies a general pattern that indicates most of the African students do not intend to stay behind in Hong Kong after graduation. While internationalization is a major strategic development of Hong Kong universities, there remain an insignificant number of African students on Hong Kong campuses. We suggest that recruiting more African university students can enhance the international profile of Hong Kong universities and strengthen academic internationalization at large.

Introduction

More than half a century ago, the academic literature on the university destinations of African students began to emerge with particular interest in the case of the United States (Banks, 2006). Yet thus far, studies on African students in Hong Kong are almost non- existent, largely due to its comparatively small population size. The population of international students at The University of Hong Kong, for instance, has a skewed nationality distribution. There is an obvious contrast in population size between the dominant group of Mainland Chinese students and the minority groups of African students and South American students – which constitute less than one percent of the total student population (The University of Hong Kong, 2012a). This under- representation of African students raises an interesting question: What motivates this small but emerging student group to come to this post-colonial Chinese city? This is important given that this initial batch of students may expand networks by sharing experiences and thereby potentially motivating subsequent batches of African students to consider Hong Kong as a destination for their university studies. Considering this issue, this paper will firstly review the relevant bodies of literature. Secondly, it will discuss the methodological tools used to answer the research questions. The third section will examine the results of interviews with ten African students in Hong Kong. Lastly, the key issues and implications for further research will be discussed in-depth.

African Students in China's Hong Kong: The Context

Cooperation between Africa, China, and Hong Kong dates back to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. But the scale and substance of such cooperation have undergone a significant transformation over time (Gillespie, 2001). The early China-led political cooperation helped former colonized African countries to tackle political crisis, namely by claiming that both parties were part of the "Third World" (Gillespie, 2001:20). Tighter Africa-China exchanges have become increasingly based around economic issues, especially in the aftermath of the 2007-08 financial crises (Bodomo, 2012). But an academic element has also turned out to be prevalent in the Africa-China interactions when the increasing trend of African students studying in China is considered.

Bodomo (2012) expresses that generally Africa could not be fully interpreted as a single entity because some African countries had closer relations to China than others (Bodomo, 2009). In addition, he argues that migration of most of the Africans to Hong Kong is driven by economic incentives, whereas only two out of thirty participants in his research came to Hong Kong with an academic pursuit (Bodomo, 2012).

Meanwhile, the research site (at the ChungKing Mansions on Nathan Road in Hong Kong) has been negatively described as "dangerous/unsafe" (Bodomo, 2006:457) and is often seen as a place where people are obsessed with "drugs/crimes" (Bodomo, 2006:457). Furthermore, the area of African students in Hong Kong is under-researched according to the related academic literatures.

To explain the motivations and aspirations of international students, Mpingganjira (2009) categorizes the factors into academic, personal, and occupational dimensions; and the quality of education abroad, personally by the "want to broaden personal experience" and occupationally by perceiving that "studying abroad can enhance future employment" (p.361). Regarding the ethnoscape of international students, Altbach and Knight observe a "South to North" flow (Altbach and Knight, 2007:28). In this connection, Phelps (2010) adds that many international students are from less developed countries due to the significant differences between the quality of university education provided by the developed countries and the developing counterparts.

As for Africa, there are on average less than six universities in each country (approximately 300 universities across 54 African countries (Teferra & Altbach, 2004)). Teferra and Altbach (2004) argue that African universities are relatively novices in operation and in delivering quality teaching and research, not unrelated to the economic (under)development. Lack of university places and shortage of quality education are the factors that push African students to study abroad.

However, it is not accurate to over-generalize that the overall African higher education system is disadvantaged, given that some countries are doing exceptionally better than others. Notable examples include the Egyptian higher education as one of the oldest in the world, the increasing higher education enrollment rates in Nigeria and South Africa, and the growth of "private higher education" in Kenya (Teferra & Altbach, 2004:31). Moreover, Muuka and Choongo (2009) argue that with the development of solid quality assurance measures (for students, teachers and areas of study), Africa is the continent with the highest potential for growth, particularly in terms of global influence. Yet, these are in initial stages and the outcomes are yet to be determined. Uneven resource distribution in some African universities, including the funding imbalance between undergraduates and postgraduates (for example in law faculties), motivates some postgraduate students to opt for a place in overseas universities, with the UK and the US being the most popular countries (Mwenda, 2009). Furthermore, overseas education is likely to be more beneficial when the students aim for a career in the political field (Constant *et al.*, 2010). Therefore disciplinary consideration and career aspiration are the important factors that shape the ethnoscape of African overseas students' migration.

African students *de facto* constitute the largest proportion among the international students in the UK (Maringe & Carter, 2007). As the former colonizer of a significant portion of the African continent, the UK is a popular destination of many an African student largely due to the strong linkage and transferability in terms of academic structure, education qualifications and academic culture between the British system and its African counterpart. In the US, African students are however not the dominant group (Aslanbeigui & Montecinos, 1998) although more African students can be found in some departments, for example computer science at graduate level (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). A strong likelihood is observed that most African students will go back to their home countries after graduation (Hazen & Albert, 2006). Regarding the case of Asia, Bodomo (2012) notes the growing number of African students studying in China and most of them study on scholarship or other financial sponsorship. As for Hong Kong, internationalization is a top issue in university agenda (see The University of Hong Kong, 2012b), and research about African students on Hong Kong campuses will add important knowledge to the academic literature and inform university policies. On top of the issues we discussed above, the gender issue of African overseas students is a special point of interest in this topic. According to Maundeni (1999), Africa women are assumed to play the role of family helpers and African female students are often disadvantaged under the dominance of male African students. We will revisit this point when the research sampling and implications are discussed in a latter part of this paper.

Research Questions

Based on the context of African students in Hong Kong, this research aims to investigate the areas of *motivations, adaptations and university support and aspirations. Hence, (1) w*hat motivates African students to come to Hong Kong for their higher education studies, (2) how do African students adapt to life in Hong Kong (3), do Hong Kong universities provide sufficient support, and (4) what are the aspirations of African students after they have completed their course of study in Hong Kong?

Methodology

This research employed in-depth interviews as the main research method. The first author of this paper conducted the interviews between May and June 2013 in his capacity as a local postgraduate student at The University of Hong Kong. The interview data are supplemented by related survey data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Owing to the small number of African students in Hong Kong, in-depth case studies are a more appropriate method to investigate the uniqueness of every participant (for example, African students were only included in "others" category which includes "Central and South America and African Countries" constituting the total share of 0.9 % (The University of Hong Kong, 2012a)). Also, interviews can comprehensively identify the gradual changes of each participant over time by the interviewer asking about their experiences and life history at different stages of their studies (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A quantitative survey was utilized at an earlier stage to identify participants' demographic information, within which some variables could be found out to support the interview data (Wolf, 1997). For data interpretation, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently coded to identify the core emerging themes and patterns from the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All data were cross-checked by the interviewees to ensure data consistency and credibility. The demographic information of the ten research participants (each of them is identified with codes from RP001 to RP010) can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the Research Participants (RPs)

Research Participant	Country of Origin	British Connection	Gender	Marital Status	Overseas Experience Before Hong Kong	Age	Study Major
RP001	Eritrea	Former British Colony	Male	Married	Yes [UK]	40 or above	Education
RP002	Egypt	Former British	Male	Single	Yes [Germany]	20-29	Computer Science

		Colony					
RP003	Ghana	Former British Colony	Male	Single	Yes [UK]	30-39	Construction Management
RP004	Ghana	Former British Colony	Male	Married	No	30-39	Journalism
RP005	Kenya	Former British Colony	Male	Single	Yes [UK]	20-29	Law
RP006	Nigeria	Former British Colony	Male	Single	Yes [US, Greece]	20-29	Information Systems
RP007	Nigeria	Former British Colony	Male	Single	No	20-29	Computer Science
RP008	Nigeria	Former British Colony	Male	Single	No	30-39	Building and Real Estate
RP009	Tanzania	Former British Colony	Male	Married	No	40 or above	Education
RP010	Zimbabwe	Former British Colony	Male	Married	No	30-39	Sociology

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Findings

Explorative in nature, this research sought to identify the individual motivations through in-depth interviews. The interview data are reported according to the following key themes and conceptual issues:

Hong Kong with a High Concentration of World-Class Universities and Globally Renowned Academic Professionals

Academic factors can be identified as the most common and important considerations for the decision to study in Hong Kong. This can be identified from the following quote:

"Hong Kong is a good place and when I graduate from Hong Kong, I can compete with anyone in the world - from Oxford, from Sydney, from America and even from Africa." (RP010, interview dated May 26, 2013).

This reflects the participant's confidence about his studies. RP003 articulated the quality of higher education offered in Hong Kong in the following way:

"The training and access to resources are special, because it is difficult to do a PhD in my country. For instance, even though you get professors who have studied abroad, the resources are not up to the standard, compared with the resources that I will get in places like HKU." (RP003, interview dated 22 May, 2013).

Various aspects of the quality of education which Hong Kong universities offered are discussed in several interview quotations below:

"If you look at the staff component within the department at HKU, you find out that it is a mainly cosmopolitan kind of society where you see professors, lecturers, and researchers from different places across the world." (RP010, interview dated May 26, 2013).

"For the motivation to come to Hong Kong, it was, like, to get more exposure, to get more experience of a developed university… because if you think about the university I am studying at right now, it is very much more competitive compared with those in developing countries." (RP009, interview dated May 22, 2013).

"The university ranking is very well-known in the world, so everybody is watching The University of Hong Kong. For the technical level, I think it is a very promising topic regarding the new future design of computers and operating systems." (RP002, interview dated May 22, 2013).

"I notice that almost all my lecturers in my department, almost all of them come from different backgrounds. They are not only from China; they are from different parts of the world. So, that also brings together a whole experience of academic background and that is very important to me." (RP004, interview dated May 16, 2013).

The above interview data illustrate the competitive edges which Hong Kong universities possess as most of them aim to provide an international platform for their students (see The University of Hong Kong, 2012b). Supervision by world class academic professionals is undoubtedly an attractive point for doing a research postgraduate degree in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's Reputation Worldwide

Hong Kong's reputation, with its well-developed university sector, has gained currency worldwide (Tang, 2014). According to Mpingganjira (2009), access to high quality of education abroad is one of the justifications for overseas studies. International students also perceive that future employment prospects can be enhanced by studying abroad (Mpingganjira, 2009). In this connection, RP001 states thus:

"I met people from Singapore, from India, from Malaysia, from other countries and I asked them whether it was good to go and study at The University of Hong Kong. They strongly recommended me to go and do my studies at The University of Hong Kong." (RP001, interview dated May 21, 2013)

Further, RP004 reported:

"So if you happen to graduate from The University of Hong Kong with a Master's Degree, I mean everybody would know that you are a good student." (RP004, interview dated May 16, 2013).

This reputation, not surprisingly, is constructed through the 'social technology' of world-class university rankings of different sorts. The quotation below by RP010 reinforces this point:

"I always have this admiration for the University of Hong Kong because I have seen in particular how the University of Hong Kong…say for ranking … is one of the top universities in the world." (RP010, interview dated May 26, 2013).

"It is a fact that I noticed and saw that The University of Hong Kong, in some of the rankings, was ranked 21st/22nd and indeed was ranked the first university in Asia. I said wow; this must be a giant in Asia." (RP007, interview dated May 24, 2013).

"And then generally I think City U is on the path of progress especially in world university rankings. Maybe three years ago, it was 130th… something like 135th, and right now it is 95th and I see that it is going upwards, I think it is an extremely remarkable progress for a university of less than 30 years old." (RP006, interview dated June 3, 2013).

Some disciplines were noted as performing particularly well in the rankings. As RP001 remarks, "The Faculty of Education has a very high reputation in this area." (RP001, interview dated May 21, 2013). Indeed, the respondents perceived this would prove to be extremely useful in terms of "marketing" themselves in the future. RP009 remarks as follows, "When I get an education at The University of Hong Kong, I would get a fantastic education which would be very marketable." (RP009, interview dated May 22, 2013).

The Global Currency of Hong Kong Academic Credentials

In terms of academic credentials, a Hong Kong degree was perceived as putting African students in an advantageous position with high global currency. RP009 illustrated this view by saying,

"You will be widening the possibilities of getting more jobs elsewhere in the world because people would think about where this guy is coming from…he graduated from this university!" (RP009, interview dated May 22, 2013).

RP003 remarks as follows:

"I knew about HKU because I already knew two people from my department back in my country who came to do their PhD at HKU. You know, sometimes I just search from university rankings… The University really has quite a number of the staff from around the world, so that would be a good environment, too." (RP003, interview dated May 22, 2013).

RP009 also revealed, with reference to a friend who graduated with a PhD from a Hong Kong university, the following:

"Why they wanted to hire him was not only because he had a PhD. No, it was because he got a PhD from a reputable university. It is not just getting a PhD from any universities." (RP009, interview dated May 22, 2013).

Alongside the findings in the previous sections, interview data above again buttress the idea that overseas education can enhance future employment (Mpingganjira, 2009) and that it gives students a promising future after graduation.

Overseas Experience: Hong Kong, the British Connections and Legacy

It is noteworthy that most of the ten students in this study had overseas experience, especially in the UK, prior to their studies in Hong Kong. In describing the ethos of a Hong Kong university, RP002 explicitly stated this: "I feel like Hong Kong has a very British style." (RP002, interview dated May, 22, 2013). The use of English as research and teaching languages encourages the movement of African students to universities in Hong Kong. RP003 stated that: "It was the fact that in HKU the official language of the University [is English]. So at least, I get to talk to my supervisor in English and, you know, also with some colleagues and other staff." (RP003, interview dated May 22, 2013). This opinion by RP004 is further elaborated below:

"And also the fact that it is mainly an English-speaking university. I wouldn't have that kind of language barrier to studying and that was the first motivation which brought me to The University of Hong Kong." (RP004, interview dated May, 16, 2013). RP006 was of the opinion that the encounter of East and West makes Hong Kong interesting:

"It is a place where you can have a feeling of the real Eastern cultures like Chinese culture, but at the same time, you can feel Western influences in the city, as it was a British colony for a long time. It still has the British influence here. The official languages are actually English and Cantonese." (RP006, interview dated June 3, 2013).

Echoing Zaccrisson's (2004) argument that English is an influential factor for overseas studies, the findings presented above highlight the fact that the influence of English is not only in the realm of language, but also in terms of culture. African students can find the British colonial legacy being displayed in the key elements of Hong Kong culture.

International Networks and Exposure in Hong Kong Universities

International networks and international exposure offered by Hong Kong universities are essential features that motivate students from Africa to come to study in Hong Kong. RP006 expressed this idea as follows:

"We have a lot of very famous professors here, for example, the leader of the Association of Information Systems, which is pretty much the biggest information systems organization in the world." (RP006, interview dated June 3, 2013).

In the same token, RP004 expressed the point in this way:

"It has been a good stepping-stone for me, a point where I feel that I can reach out to the rest of the world to do anything that I want to do. With my chest out, I am very confident of what I have to do." (RP004, interview dated May 16, 2013).

According to RP009, international exposure in academic work is extremely important:

"You need to be part of a society, which has reputable researchers. So if you get the wide knowledge offered by The University of Hong Kong, I hope it would let someone get much more exposure, much more exposed to the academic point of view, exposure in terms of research and making links to others you know around the world because this university is highly linked. So many people from different parts of the world come here." (RP009, interview dated May 22, 2013).

Overall speaking, it is shown that Hong Kong universities are on a par with other world class universities, offering similar scope and substance of international exposure and networks for the benefit of graduates' future career (Hazen & Alberts, 2006).

Financial Support and Time to Complete Degree

The financial support enjoyed by the full time research postgraduate students in Hong Kong is an important factor in the African students' consideration and calculation to come to Hong Kong. RP009 revealed the following:

"If you get an offer in my country, your offer will be around 6,000 Hong Kong dollars [per month]. You do not need to pay that much per month, out of that you have to pay your school fee, university fee. But at HKU, at the point I joined this university, they were offering me around 13,000 [per month]." (RP009, interview dated May 22, 2013).

RP006 believed that stable and sufficient financial support can enable him to concentrate on his studies:

"It is more work but I always love challenges and I think my coming to Hong Kong was also quite attractive - in that I could get it [doctoral study] done in three or four years and all the things in my life here look good." (RP006, interview dated June 3, 2013).

A similar point was expressed by RP003:

"I applied to one other university not in Hong Kong and I got admission as well. They all gave me admission but it came to who gave me funding, it was down to who gave me funding… I got funding for four years because I didn't really want to do a PhD with half funding [from a UK university]". (RP003, interview dated May 22, 2013).

In comparative terms, the financial incentive provided by Hong Kong universities is considerably attractive, with reference to this quotation below by RP001:

"Apart from the quality of the education in Hong Kong, I found out that the situation about the tuition fees was very fair, especially when I compare that I can get the same quality of education that I would get in the UK, but the kind of fees that I am paying here are much cheaper." (RP001, interview dated May 21, 2013). Findings from this research and the academic literature show that financial incentive is evident in motivating overseas education. Phelps (2010) argues that the flow of international students is more often from less developed countries to the more developed ones, instead of the other way round. In this case, the migration flow of African university students to the economically better off Hong Kong agrees with the general argument of relevant studies (for example, Bodomo, 2012).

Different Takes on Being Mobile: Married Students and Single Students

Concerning the strategies for being mobile, the African participants have different takes according to their marital status. RP009 described family as a source of motivation for pursuing higher education studies:

"If you have a family before you come to study, the family wants you to get to a higher level of education, that might give you pressure…They need my support. So, with these needs, they really motivate me to go back to stay with my family." (RP009, interview dated May 22, 2013).

The view of RP001, who is also a married student, echoes this view:

"People like me who are married, who have some responsibilities back at home do need to keep in touch with the family because it makes you to be at ease in your study and you can fully concentrate on your studies. If, however, you do not have access to your family, it is kind of frustrating. You always get worried about your family back at home.

It really affects the motivations that I have contact on a regular base with my family…you are keeping in touch with your family on a regular basis, this means whatever the decision you make, it is becoming a shared decision, for example, after your graduation, you have to decide whether you go back home, whether you stay here and work in Hong Kong or whether you go somewhere else. You can discuss this sort of thing on a daily basis with your family and you decide together, so it is really helpful." (RP001, interview dated May 21, 2013).

Most of the research participants of this study do not intend to stay behind in Hong Kong upon graduation. The general intention of returning to Africa again implies that their stay in Hong Kong is temporary, treating the destination of higher education as a stepping- stone (Hazen and Alberts, 2012).

Discussion

A combination of factors motivated the students to come to Hong Kong. RP006's quote is probably the most convincing to explain the situation of the limited number of African students in Hong Kong:

"We do not conventionally come to a place like Hong Kong to study. Usually the destinations of choice include the UK, the US, and some parts of Europe but not really Hong Kong." (RP006, interview dated June 3, 2013).

Some participants in this research had indeed studied overseas (e.g. the UK and the US) before coming to Hong Kong. Still, Hong Kong was chosen as their current education destination because Hong Kong is the most internationalized city within the Chinese region, and the financial sponsorship offered by Hong Kong universities is more attractive than that by other polities in the region. The relatively shorter time to complete the degree in Hong Kong also suits some students. All of these points allow Hong Kong universities to be unique in motivating the participants to study in Hong Kong. Academically speaking, RP010 also reflected that he was very confident about his studies (interview dated May 26, 2013). Also, the British influence seemed to have motivated RP010 and other students' selection of Hong Kong universities.

Nevertheless, motivations were different between two groups; the married and the unmarried students. The first group had a higher tendency to go back to their country upon graduation. Contrasting views can be seen by these two pieces of interview data:

 "I don't think I will be able to stay behind after graduation without my family here" (RP008, interview dated May 30, 2013) and "not much actually, but I keep in contact with my family, we keep talking. But family was never the top priority of my decision to come to Hong Kong" (RP002, interview dated May 22, 2013).

On another point, most participants expressed the fact that they were academically motivated to study in Hong Kong in the first place. However, some participants of this research revealed that social needs were gradually found to be essential for sustaining a good study life. For example, RP009, who was in his final stage of PhD studies explained that the longer he stayed in Hong Kong, the more important social life became as it made his study life more satisfying. This indicates that academic factors motivate some African students to come to Hong Kong in the first place. But socio-cultural factors have often become increasingly important as they establish themselves in Hong Kong.

Conclusion, Research Implications and Limitations

Academic reputation was the most important motivating factor for African students to choose Hong Kong universities, although other factors contributed to this final choice. Other factors such as family and social interactions also affected their motivations after they had settled down in Hong Kong. Overall, their motivations were generally similar, despite certain personal characteristics and perspectives.

As an explorative study, this research has offered some preliminary and informative findings but the limited number of participants means that it cannot make wider generalizations about the motivations of African students to choose Hong Kong universities. In particular, all the participants were 1) males, 2) postgraduates, and 3) from former British colonies; it is specific enough to shed light on this group of students. Still, what the term "African university students" covers is very general. Other, very different, groups could include 1) African females, 2) undergraduates, and 3) Africans from non-former British colonies, which were not investigated.

It is suggested that further research is undertaken to investigate overseas African students. The scope of the student population could be extended, for example, to females and undergraduates. This is because the literature has shown that African women are often disadvantaged (e.g. Manudeni, 1999) whereas motivations, academic experiences and aspirations of undergraduates and postgraduates are expected to be largely different.

Also family issues were found to be a highly important factor for making sense of the students' motivations and aspirations for overseas studies. Finally, a reconsideration of the "West" as at the centre of higher education is called for. RP001 has an apt opinion on this point:

 "People have the mentality that the best education in the world can be found mainly in the western countries. I really want to challenge that as you can get the same kind of the quality of education in some Asian countries such as Hong Kong." (RP001, interview dated May 21, 2013).

Future research might further test whether Hong Kong's reputation as a centre for world class higher education as well as the global currency of Hong Kong academic credentials remain as the key motivating factors for African students to study in Hong Kong. Preliminary insights offered by this paper may inform further studies about the African presence in emerging higher education hubs, especially those not located in the West - but in different parts of the world.

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