

# **The Next Generation of Social Scientists: Experiences of Early Career Academics from Sub-Saharan Africa (0289)**

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## **Abstract**

This is a qualitative study of 22 social science masters and doctoral students from Sub-Saharan Africa at a UK research university. The findings highlight the deceptive power of a category such as ‘international students’, the way in which these students developed and sustained networks that crossed continents and the worlds of academia and practice, and the ways in which individual biographies and planning for possible career futures defined the understanding of ‘academic practice’ espoused by these students.

**Keywords:** Sub-Saharan Africa, Experience, Internationalisation, Social Science, Expectation

## **Context**

Whilst there is a growing literature on ‘internationalisation’, much of it relates to undergraduates rather than postgraduates. Further, this work (e.g., Bound, Turner & Walsh, 2009) tends to treat international students as a group in contrast with UK nationals, overlooking distinct cultural-historical influences that may contribute to quite different expectations and experiences. With some exception (e.g., Cadman, 2000), there has been much less thought about how, and if, experiences of studying in the UK shape people’s learning and scholarly futures.

Over the last eight years, UK higher education institutes have witnessed a 70% growth in the number of doctoral students from Sub-Saharan Africa (HESA, 2009). Of these, up to half are likely to be social scientists. Little has been reported of their experiences. This study is carried out amongst the five universities that receive the majority of students from sub-Saharan Africa.

## **Approach**

Using a case study approach, 22 individuals were recruited through personal contacts and word of mouth. Most were hoping to maintain a connection with universities in their future careers, but few saw themselves as reliant on an academic career. Our research involved semi-structured individual interviews with the participants, followed up by two focus groups with selected participants.

## **Emerging themes**

Three broad sets of findings are coming out of the research. The first set relate to the limits and problems associated with labelling and categorising students. The research questions the value of a blanket category of ‘international students’. African postgraduate students cannot be stereotyped as one single distinct group of students with shared experiences and challenges. Instead, they are individuals with different backgrounds, including different nationalities, family backgrounds, ethnic origins, etc, all of which shapes their approach to postgraduate study. This finding echoes work on

doctoral education in the social sciences about such variation (e.g., Hall & Burns, 2009; Solem, Hopwood & Schlemper, 2010).

We argue instead for understanding these students as having biographies within particular institutions and the complex geopolitics of global higher education. Yet, the social backgrounds and higher education systems from which students come delimit individual career choices and possibilities, but generic labels – such as ‘African students’ – can be misleading. We do not wish to deny or downplay all differences, as our interviews pointed to aspects of UK academic culture that the literature on international students has already highlighted as troubling (eg Robinson-Pant 2009). But the adoption and promotion of the ‘international’ label can lead people into thinking about their experience in certain predetermined ways.

Secondly, our research highlighted the importance of the social networks that developed amongst Sub-Saharan African students. Some groups were based around social events, others around political affiliations, research discussions or nationality. These networks ran independently, though sometimes overlapped. Some networks were highly structured, while some were very informal and sometimes invisible. One participant pointed out that whilst he did not have a formal group of colleagues who worked together, knowing of their presence at the university made a difference to his studies. This mirrors other work (e.g., Sweitzer, 2009) regarding the importance of the networks that postgraduate students create for themselves.

Thirdly, the nature of their UK academic experience is shaped by the career visions of participants. They had to plan and negotiate a future that extended far beyond the university as an institutional career setting when they went back. Trained academics may, for example, spend nearly all their time doing consultancy work. Many claimed that their present research experience was a luxury impossible in their home societies. These students argued strongly that their university study would help them to make a contribution to their societies through engaging and applying their scholarship. The students had little time for a disengaged or ‘theory-driven’ vision of academia.

## **Significance**

The research finds that academic experiences of Sub-Saharan African postgraduate students were shaped by their diverse backgrounds, their professional relationships whilst in the UK, and the future career possibilities open to them. This leads us to question the deployment of the ‘international students’ label, whilst the students themselves articulate a vision of a research career that links continents and bridges ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ contexts.

Our research highlights the limits of a narrow understanding of ‘academic careers’ and ‘academic practice’ for those working in African higher education. For all its flexibility as a concept, African-based researchers have to plan and negotiate a future that extends far beyond the university as a career setting. Academics may, for example, spend most of their time doing consultancy work. This, we suggest, limits the validity of the term ‘academic practice’ in an African context. Current understandings of the term may need to be rethought for universities in the global South.

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