

Foreign Students' Experience in Ghana

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Abstract

The study was to determine foreign students' experience in Ghanaian tertiary institutions with the primary objectives of empirically;

Determining the demographic characteristics of foreign students in Ghana

Determining how their overall perception and attitude influence their behavioural intentions.

Data was collected from a total of 351 students selected purposely from six tertiary institutions in Ghana using questionnaire.

The results of the study indicate that Ghana is an emerging destination for foreign education particularly among African countries. A total 38 different nationalities are pursuing university education in Ghana. The current study shows that feedback from lecturers, quality of teaching access to lecturers and professionalism of support staffs are perceived to be the most important variables influencing foreign students' satisfaction and that the overall perception and attitude that a foreign student develops towards a host country is a function of the student's institutional experience and country experience.

Overall the students were generally satisfied with the experience in Ghana and in Ghanaian tertiary institutions.

Key words: Foreign students, Ghana, institutional experience, country experience, behavioural intention.

1. Introduction

Studies into foreign students' experience are not new. At least there is evidence in the literature to suggest that a study was conducted in 1955 by Useem and Useem (1955) titled *The Western-Educated Man in India*. In the past foreign education was predominantly a movement of students from developing countries into universities in western developed countries. Little was heard of movement from one developing country to another developing country in search of a higher education. Hence the literature on foreign students' experience is largely on foreign students' experience in western universities. These movements were predominantly students moving from one western country to another western university or from Asian or African countries to a western university. Little was heard of movement from one African country to another African University. Today there are many foreign students from neighboring African countries and beyond in Ghanaian tertiary institutions in pursuit of a higher education.

Studies in many universities on foreign students experience show that indeed foreign students face different kinds of challenges during their stay. According to Burggraaf (1997), there are clearly a number of identified influences on the education and socio cultural experiences of students studying internationally. Steel (2008) in a study noted that many Asian students go through stress and adjustment difficulties during their initial enrolment therefore counseling plays an important role. Social activities and close working relationships with other students and international orientation programmes are considered most important variables within the social construct that influences student satisfaction. This research is therefore empirically to;

Determine the demographic characteristics of foreign students in Ghana

Determine how their overall perception and attitude influences their behavioural intentions.

2. Literature review

Studies into foreign students' experiences have highlighted some key challenges and experiences that confront foreign students in pursuit of a higher tertiary education. One of such key challenges reported by numerous researchers is language barrier. See Li, Chen and Duanmu (2010), Hellsten and Prescott,(2000), Zhang and Bruton (2007), AL-Bustan, Ahmed and Lamees (2008) and Steel (2008). Challenges with language range from stress from language and communication issues, fear of being misunderstood, cultural differences, proficiency in local language, ability to contribute and participate in class discussions. This challenge collectively affects the way some foreign students interact with host nationals and their lecturers.

Challenges and experience relating to easy access and availability of accommodation, type of accommodation and its impact on a foreign student varies. Residential type of accommodation of a student studies have shown

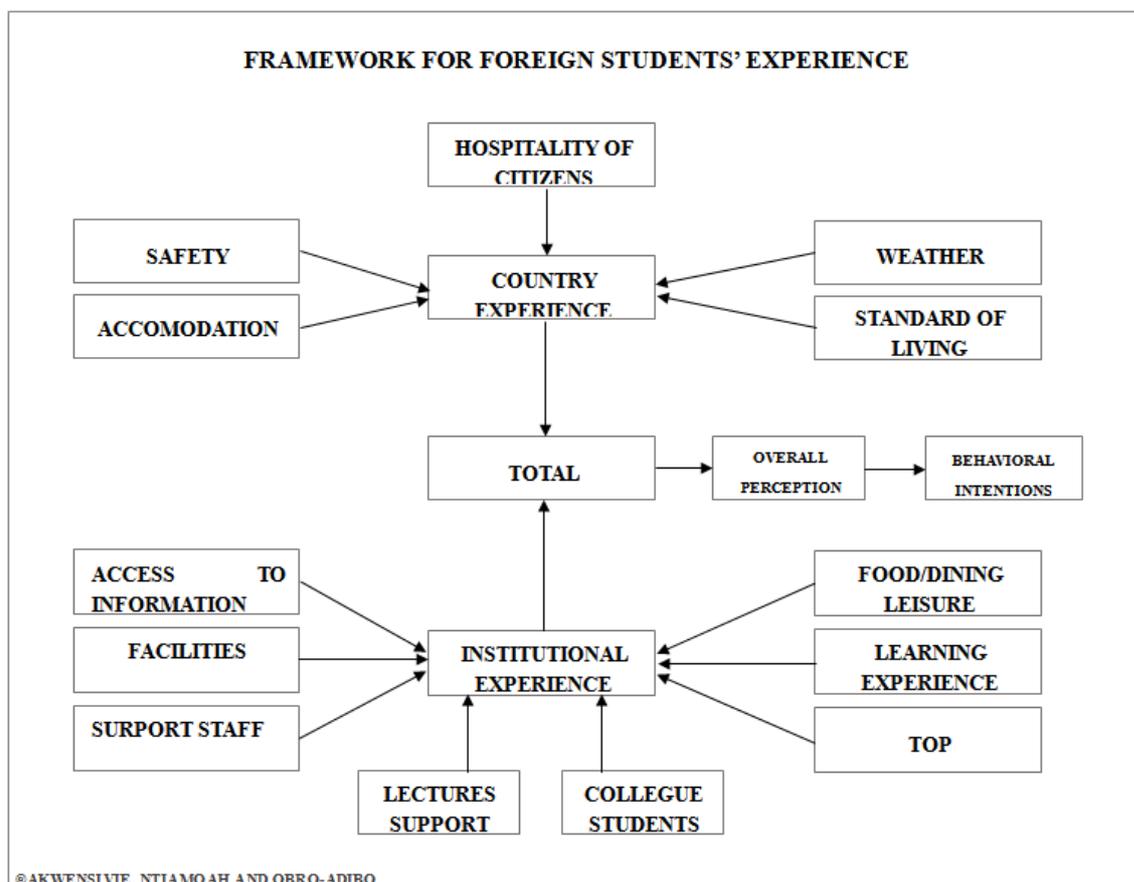
have different levels of impact on a foreign student's experience. As Burggraaf (1997) put it, living home undoubtedly has its formative advantages. These advantages include the opportunity for fostering intercultural relations, increasing intercultural understanding and increasing socialization, Zhang and Brunton (2007). Ward (2001) however noted that home stay accommodation comes with its challenges. Sometimes these arrangements may prove a significant source of stress for international students as some students who live in a home stay experience difficulties with strange food, language, behaviours and customs as well as dealing with conflict. Absence or limited accommodation facilities on campus create problems for international students Gustafson (2005) as reported in an Italian University of Bari, where hostels and apartments to accommodate students were few therefore creating more problems for international students who needed an urgent accommodation.

Access to transportation (Steeve,2004) availability and access to institutional information (Maringe and Carter,2007), cost and standards of living(Yipping, 2008) and adjustment to local weather conditions (Steel,2008), food and dining experience(Steele, 2008, Yipping, 2008 and Tanya, Jim and Jean (2012), has been highlighted in many studies as some of the determinants and challenges which influence foreign students' experience. For many students, institutional choice needs to be supported by information relating to cost, description for progression, availability of accommodation, labour market information especially opportunities for part time work and international composition of students body (Maringe and Carter (2007). According to Arambewela and Hall (2009), economic considerations, migration opportunities, causal jobs and cost of living are considered the most important variables. In terms of accommodation, international students expect student accommodation to be provided by the universities or private agencies to at least minimum standard and at a reasonable cost. Yipping (2008) and Steele (2008) noted that the Chinese and Muslim foreign student particularly have problem adjusting to local foods because of their strict dietary requirements and appetite for their native foods.

On educational experience, Nair, Murdoch and Mertova (2012) identified campus size, Steele (2008) feedback from lecturers, good access to lecturers and quality of teaching, Rasli (2006), professionalism of support staff as some of the variables influencing educational experience of foreign students. Nair, Murdoch and Mertova (2012) in a study conclude that small campus size helps promote easy socialization among students, effective communication between students and lecturers and it promotes students to improve their learning skills. On their part, Steele (2008) and Rasli (2006) highlights the fact that feedback from lecturers, good access to lecturers, quality teaching, product knowledge and professionalism of support staff are perceived to be the most important variables influencing student satisfaction. This according to Rasli (2006) instills confidence in international students as it is perceived that the support staff understood international students' specific needs and also had their best interest at heart. Availability of institutional facilities like computers, tables and chairs in lecture and examination halls (Mele, 2009), internship (working) experience (O'Neill, 2006) have also been highlighted in many studies. Apart from educational experience, safety according to Arambewela and Hall (2009) is a major concern for international students and their families. In their study they found out that parents worry about this because their children are away from home and they would have little control over them. International students according to them would prefer a university with a high prestige as it is expected that such image and prestige would create better carrier opportunities for them. Gaining international image and prestige as an international institution is a long and arduous process requiring a commitment to excellence in delivery of education and quality research output.

3. Workforce Sizing Plan (WOZIP)

3. Research Methodology



Research Design and Population

The nature of the research problems, research objectives and research questions suggests that the types of research designs suitable for this study was both exploratory and descriptive in nature which lends itself towards both qualitative and quantitative data. Hence the selection of a representative sample from the various universities was not a priority for the researchers.

Six tertiary institutions in Ghana were purposively and conveniently selected as the population for the study. Apart from University of Ghana which is a public University, all the other six University Colleges are private institutions.

The table below illustrates the sample size and sampling techniques used for the various institutions.

Fig 1: Sampling for Foreign Students

Name of Institution	Sample Size	Sampling Technique Used
Methodist University College	28	Purposive
Pentecost University College	72	Purposive
Central University College	59	Purposive
Zenith University College	99	Purposive
Wisconsin University College	34	Purposive
University of Ghana	59	Purposive
Total sample size	351	Purposive

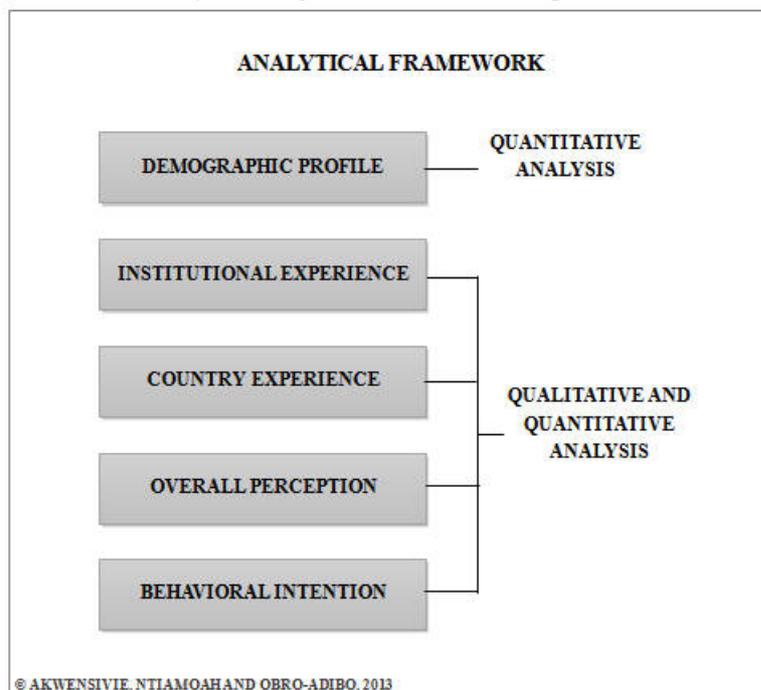
Data collection and analysis procedure

Twelve research assistants from Methodist University College Ghana were used to administer and collect the completed questionnaire. The data was collected in June 2013.

The questions were designed bearing in mind the research problems, research objectives, research questions and the key themes that emerged from the literature review. The questionnaire contained both close and open ended questions aimed at addressing the research objectives and research questions. A total of 35 open and close ended questions were asked on the questionnaire. The questions were developed to solicit responses from 9 thematic areas developed from the literature review as shown in the conceptual framework. In all a total of valid questionnaire were collected and analyzed using IBM SPSS version 9. The data was analyzed using the framework below as a guide.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the framework developed below:



Demographic profile of respondents

A total of 38 different nationalities (foreign students) are pursuing education in Ghanaian Universities in Accra. Out of this Nigerians 197 representing 56.1% of the study population of 351 students sampled from 6 different Universities. This is followed by Togo 32 (representing 9.1%), Ivory Coast 30 (representing 8.5%), Dr Congo 13 (representing 3.7%), Gabon 9 (representing 2.6%) and Benin, Liberia and South Africa 8 (representing 2.3% each). (See appendix for details).

The sampled population falls within the age range of 15years-35years with majority (67%) of them within the age range of 21-25years followed by 15-20years (17.9%), 26-30years (11.4%) and 31-35years (3.7%). 96% of the respondents are able to speak English and pursuing diploma (0.6%), undergraduate (93.3%) and post graduate (6.1%) degree programmes. They are at different levels of their study with majority of them at level 100 (32.4%) followed by Level200 (24.0%), Level300 (22.8%), Level 400(20.2%) and Post graduate level (0.6%). This shows a gradual increase in foreign students' admission in Ghanaian tertiary institutions.

The sampled populations are pursuing business related programs of study in Human resources management (24.5%), Accounting (21.3%), Marketing (17.9%) and Information Technology (15.6%). Others representing 20.7% are pursuing Management, psychology and other non-business programmes of study. 74.5% of the students live in a private hostel facility, 18.3% live in on-campus facility provided by the universities with only 7.2% of them living with a family. Of the total respondents, 69.4 % of them have travelled outside Accra where they study to other parts of Ghana for local tourism whilst the remaining 30.6% have never travelled outside Accra since arriving in Ghana to pursue higher education. All the students in the sample have had at least one

academic year experience in their various universities.

Institutional Experience

The students were generally satisfied with their educational experience in their various Universities with specific reference to the quality and satisfaction of teaching, lecturers' accessibility and helpfulness. These collectively influence 73.1% of the students positively their willingness to take part in class discussion. With regards to teaching satisfaction, 71.7% (19.4%-Very satisfied and 52.3%-satisfied) of them were generally satisfied with 23.7% of the student neutral about their experience. Only a 4.5% (3.4%-dissatisfied and 1.1%-very dissatisfied) of the students were dissatisfied with teaching. This corresponds with their rating of teaching quality again with majority of the student 76.9% (strongly agree-22.3% and agree 54.6%) agreeing that the quality of teaching in their universities are good. 19.4%-neutral, 2.6%-disagree and 1.1% strongly disagree.

These ratings is largely supported by the fact that majority, 69.9% (strongly agree-19.2% and 50.7%) and 63.0% (strongly agree-16% and agree-47%) of the students felt that their lecturers were helpful and accessible respectively whilst 24.1% and 28.9% of the students were neutral about their assessments respectively. 6% (strongly disagree-1.7% and disagree-4.3%) and 8% (strongly disagree-1.4% and disagree-6.6%) disagree with the accession that their lecturers are helpful and accessible respectively.

With regards to their relationship with their Ghanaian students, 62% (Strongly agree-25.4% and Agree-36.6%) were of the view that their Ghanaian students are friendly whilst 25.4% were neutral. Only 10% (Disagree-8.6% and Stronglydisagree-4%) disagree that Ghanaian students are friendly. This explains why majority (71.9%) of them sit with a Ghanaian in class followed by Nigerians 19.3%. With regards to the nationality of their roommates, Nigerians were 45% followed by Ghanaians 35.4%. Given that Ghanaians were not part of the study it is evidence that Ghanaians are still the most preferred roommates for foreign students because of their friendliness particularly towards foreign students.

With regards to the students' relationship with administrative staff and whether their complaints have been responded to, majority, 61.3% (Strongly agree-18.1% and agree-43.3%) and 50.7% (Strongly agree-15.2 and agree-35.5%) agree that the administrative staff are helpful and responds to their complains. 24.1% and 26.2% were neutral whilst 14.6% (disagree-10.0% and strongly disagree-4.6%) and 22.9% (Disagree-14.0% and strongly disagree-8.9%) disagreed that the administrative staff are helpful and responds to their complains. On the standard of institutional facilities, 63% were of the view that the facilities in their universities are good and up to standard whilst 37% of them felt the facilities are not up to standard.

Country Experience

On hospitality and friendliness of Ghanaian citizen (Host nationals), 72% of the students believe that Ghanaian citizen are hospitable whilst 28% believe that Ghanaian citizens are not hospitable. This corresponds with the percentage of students who either agree or disagree with the view that Ghanaians are friendly. 62.0% (Strongly agree-25.4% and agree-36.6%) agree and 12.6% (Disagree-8.6% and strongly disagree-4.0%) disagree. The remaining 25.4% were neutral.

This can be attributed to perhaps how safe and secure they feel in Ghana as majority of them (72%) were of the view that they feel safe and secure in Ghana than in their country.

On transportation and standard of living, 61% of the students disagree that standard of living in Ghana is better than the standard of living in their country. In other words the cost of living in Ghana is expensive as compared to their country. Again 36% disagree that transportation in Ghana is better than the transportation situation in their country with 32.8% agreeing whilst 30.5% were of the view that the transportation situation in Ghana is the same as the situation in their country. On adjustment to the weather condition in Ghana, 65.2% have problem adjusting to the weather condition in Ghana. Considering that the climatic conditions in most of the countries were similar or the same to that of Ghana, it was surprising that a vast majority of the students have problem adjusting to the weather condition in Ghana. Upon further analysis and interrogation, the researchers discovered that the students interpreted weather to mean challenges with cost of living, transportation and the general challenges associated with living outside one's home country.

Overall Perception and behavioral intentions

Generally the students are satisfied with their experience in their respective universities and in Ghana as a country. This is evident by the majority response of satisfaction with their overall institutional and country experience with 72.5% (very satisfied-15.8% and satisfied-56.7%) and 73.1% (Very satisfied-19.1% and 54.0%-satisfied) of the students rating their institutional and country experience respectively with 22.3% and 22.3% of the students being neutral with their responses. Overall dissatisfaction rating was 5.2 % (dissatisfied-2.9% and very dissatisfied-2.3%) and 4.6% (dissatisfied-2.0% and very dissatisfied-2.6%) respectively.

This clearly manifested itself in the future behavioural intentions of the students with regards to their willingness to pursue their Master's Degree in Ghana and in their current university and also their willingness to recommend

someone from their country to come to Ghana for university education. 83% of the students will definitely recommend someone from their country to come to Ghana for university education. However, only 40.6% of the students will pursue their Master Degree in Ghana. Of the 40.6% willing to pursue further education in Ghana, only 42% of them are willing to pursue it in their current university. They prefer instead to do it in the public universities.

Discussion and managerial implications for theory and practice

Ghana is an emerging destination for undergraduate foreign education particularly among African countries (93.3% of students pursuing undergraduate degrees from 38 different countries). As evident from the results there is a gradual increase in foreign students' enrolment in Ghana year on year. Of the total sample size, 20.2% of the students are in their final year, 22.8% in third year, 24.0% in second year and 32.4% in first year. This movement is particularly among the youth between the ages of 15years to 35years with 67.0% of them the highest among the age of 21years -25years pursuing business and business related education.

Whilst in Ghana foreign students face a lot of experiences and issues which are institutional experience and country experience. As Burggraff (1997) will put it, there are clearly a number of identified influences on the education and socio cultural experiences of students studying internationally and Steel (2008) in a study noted that many Asian students go through stress and adjustment difficulties during their initial enrolment therefore counseling plays an important role. The institutional experience includes relationship with students (both fellow students and local students) in and outside campus, relationship with lecturers, availability of facilities on campus as well as accommodation, quality of programmes and teaching, relationship with administrative staff and their ability to respond to their complaints. Country experience includes hospitality of host nationals, country security, standard and cost of living, weather conditions, accommodation challenges and transportation difficulties. All these are called into question when foreign students are narrating their experience. Collectively they influence foreign students overall perception, attitude and behavioral intention towards the host country. That is the overall perception and attitude that a foreign student develops towards a host country is a function of the student's institutional experience and country experience. The institutional experience as evident from the study has a strong influence on the country experience (Overall institutional satisfaction experience-72.5%, overall country satisfaction experience-73.1%, and overall 83.1% positive behavioural intention of recommending Ghana as a country for university education). Once the institutional experience (perception and attitude) is positive or negative there is likely hood that this can be transferred through generalization to the overall country experience. Hence the image (the perception and attitude) of universities (including behaviour of host students) have a bigger role to play in the overall perception and attitude that foreign students develop towards a host country. For steel(2008), social activities and close working relationships with other students and international orientation programs are considered most important variables within the social construct that influences student satisfaction.

Foreign students may choose not to pursue further education in their current university or in the host country not because they are generally dissatisfied or have a bad experience with their university or host country. The decision may be due to the need to have different experience elsewhere in or outside the country. As evident in the current study, 83.1% of the students have good experience and therefore will recommend Ghana for university education however 59.3% will not further their education in Ghana. Out of the 40.6% that will further their education in Ghana, 57.8% of them will not further in their current university and will prefer to have a different experience in a different university in Ghana. Surprisingly none of the students were prepared to go back to their own country for further education instead they prefer universities in the U.K, USA, Canada or Malaysia. Preference for U.K universities topped the list followed by USA universities. For those who prefer to further their studies in Ghana, their preference was bias towards the public universities rather than the private universities. The most preferred choice was University of Ghana followed by Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.

Clearly as the results indicate, the universities have a major problem of student retention as such the universities must put in place motivation packages and incentives as a matter of urgency to improve on their students' retention. This can take the form of introduction of new and improve courses taking into consideration the labour demands of the foreign students' country, improve service delivery by the universities' administrative staff; orientation programmes for foreign students must include basic orientation of host nation's cultural practices, establishment of foreign students' office with direct responsibility of managing foreign expectations.

Theoretically the results of this research contribute to the literature on destination branding, corporate reputation management, customer satisfaction and retention strategy, perception, attitude and behaviour.

On destination branding for instance institutions like Brand Ghana with responsibility of branding the country Ghana to the outside world must work in collaboration with the universities to create a very conducive

environment for foreign students. As the results indicate, the experiences of a foreign student towards a country are greatly influenced first by their experience on the university campus which through generalization determines or influences their overall country experience.

The overall dissatisfaction rating of 5.2 % (dissatisfied-2.9% and very dissatisfied-2.3%) and 4.6% (dissatisfied-2.0% and very dissatisfied-2.6%) towards the universities and country though small is significant and must be looked at. As it is well known in the literature on word of mouth recommendation, bad WOM spreads very fast and has the potential to tarnish the image of the country and the universities. Those who are very dissatisfied are likely to narrate their experiences with passion and emotions more than those who are very satisfied to their friends and family members back home. Such bad emotions and feelings make others through generalization also form or have bad impressions about Ghana.

Being service providing institutions, a 14.6% and 22.9% dissatisfaction of students towards the administrative staff and their ability to resolve students' complaint is not acceptable. If not checked it can mar the good work done by the lecturers and the university authorities in building a good image for the universities. Their support role is crucial to the success and image building process of the universities as well as the host country as a whole. As foreign students, they serve as agents and ambassadors who can propagate the good or bad news of their university and the host country in which they find themselves to their friends and family members back home. Their experiences should therefore not be underestimated.

In spite of the minor concerns raised about transportation and security, the students are generally satisfied with their overall satisfaction in Ghanaian universities and in Ghana as a whole. This was largely attributed to the friendliness and helpfulness of Ghanaian students, quality of teaching, easy accessibility of lecturers and the hospitality of Ghanaians in general. Kinds, friendly, helpful, supportive and accommodating were the common adjectives that were used to describe Ghanaians in general. Some of these sentiments were expressed in answers to open ended questions like:

"They like to help and make foreign students feel a part of them"

"They are hardworking, intelligent and ready to help their colleagues"

"They are very friendly and welcome anybody that come in contact with them"

"They are friendly and open to all"

"They are great and fun to be with"

"They are friendly and helpful academically"

One major and general concern expressed by the students however was the fact that Ghanaians like using their local dialects to communicate even in official settings. These were expressed in sentiments like;

"They love to speak their local language too much making it difficult for us to cope"

"Sellers mostly use local language to sell"

The Nigerians however have a unique challenge with their Ghanaian counterparts

"The girls really need to learn how to socialize with Nigerians"

"Landlords (house owners) dislike Nigerians so much"

"A lot don't like Nigerians and that really hurts"

"They sometimes become elusive and withdrawn to themselves especially if they are in a group"

"They sometimes make you feel like an outsider especially in the case of a small group"

"Ghanaian students don't mingle with foreign students to share idea on campus. They stick to their fellow Ghanaian students".

Academically, the study has also made significant contribution to the literature on questionnaire design as an instrument for collecting primary data. Words, phrases or sentences used in questionnaire must be pre-tested on representatives of the sample population to ensure that the intended respondents and the researcher(s) have a common understanding and meaning of the words, phrases or sentences use in the right context since there could be other meanings attached to words, phrases or sentences aside the generally acceptable meaning. As was clearly evident in the study, respondents had a different interpretation of the question on 'adjustment to weather condition in Ghana' from that of the researchers. Whilst the researchers wanted to find out challenges in adjusting to the climatic weather condition, the respondents interpreted it to mean adjustment to the standard of living. The word 'weather' was interpreted as 'standard of living or living conditions'.

On gaining access to respondents and right of privacy, some of the respondents were not happy when during the distribution of questionnaire; the research assistants approach them and asked them, "Are you a foreign student?" This is a matter of lack of cultural understanding on the part of the research assistants. The current study supports the previous research findings of Steele (2008) and Rasli (2006) that feedback from lecturers, quality of teaching access to lecturers and professionalism of support staff are perceived to be the most important variables influencing foreign students' satisfaction.

Future research study areas and conclusion

The current study has raised some interesting questions which need further research to have a better understanding. First the current study has shown that 99.4% of the study population is pursuing undergraduate degree in Ghana. Further research is needed to find out why Ghana is not an attractive destination for postgraduate education for foreign students.

The students generally felt that the administrative staffs in their universities are nice, helpful and friendly but those in University of Ghana the only public university in the population was quick to add that the administrative staffs were more helpful and nicer towards the American and Canadian foreign students. Further research is therefore needed to ascertain this.

Clearly the topic of foreign students' experience particular in African universities is one that will continue to interest university administrators and academic researchers. This initial research exposes only a partial picture of the situation. It is our hope that this initial work generates future research interest to better understand this important educational phenomenon-the foreign students' experience.

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