The role of social networks in the transitional experiences of international African doctoral students at one university in South Africa

Chaya Herman and Charity L. Meki Kombe

Department of Education Management and Policy Studies, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to: chaya.herman@up.ac.za

Abstract

International doctoral students' sojourn encompasses three transitional processes: to the new country, to the university and to a new academic identity as a researcher in a specific discipline. This article examines the role of social networks in facilitating these transitions for international doctoral students at one South African university. It is based on qualitative interviews conducted with 23 international PhD students representing eight different disciplines and various countries in Africa. The findings suggest that students are involved in a number of social networks, which all, apart from the academic network, exclude local students. This close-knit co-national network, while providing international PhD students with a well documented survival mechanism, may hinder their international experiences and limit the acquisition of the inter-cultural skills necessary for global citizenship in the twenty-first century. The findings also indicated that family networks back home played a role in instilling worries and doubts among students related to xenophobic attacks against foreigners.

Introduction

Traditionally, African students tended to pursue tertiary education at various destinations in Europe and America. In recent years, however, there is a growing trend among African students to head to regional destinations (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015). In light of South Africa's aspiration to become a regional hub for doctoral education, 40% of the doctoral students in 2016 were international students mostly from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region and the rest of Africa (Higher Education Management Information System [HEMIS]).

International students, like migrants, experience adjustment problems created by moving to a new context and leaving their families and social networks behind. There is ample international literature exploring the experiences of this group of students, which include loneliness and isolation (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008), bias and discrimination (Lee, 2010), stress and culture shock (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002), financial pressures and adjusting to the culture of the host country (Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe, & Caldwell, 2014), lack of feelings of belonging and

connectedness (Dang & Tran, 2017) and others. There is also growing research exploring the experiences of international students in South Africa and their challenges (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015; Dzansi & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2012; Lee, 2017).

Selected studies are exploring the experiences of international doctoral students in different countries (Dang & Tran, 2017; Elliot, Baumfield, & Reid, 2016; Gopaul, 2015; Robinson-Pant, 2009). However, research that explores these students in South Africa is scarce (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012).

International doctoral students have triple adjustment challenges as they need to adjust to three different contexts: to the new country, to the university and to a new academic identity as doctoral students in specific disciplines. Socialisation theories, such as the one developed by Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001), highlight the role of formal and informal communities in ensuring students' retention. However, socialisation theories have been criticised for suggesting that the students are portrayed as a monolithic group with the onus on them to learn the norms of the host culture and adapt to the new culture (Antony, 2002). Subsequently, socialisation theories tend to overlook the students' capability to exercise personal agency and negotiate different intercultural contexts.

The role of agency in transitional journeys is explored in migration theories such as one developed by Bakewell (2010). This theory defines agency as 'the capability to exert some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed', to devise strategies and take action to cope with challenges (Bakewell, 2010, p. 1694). Bakewell suggests exploring social structures, such as migrant networks, and identifying the conditions under which such networks are established and the way they shape migration. While migration and student mobility are not the same, the latter often indicates a longer time span, student mobility undergoes similar migrant-specific processes such as the incentive and decision to leave their home country, settling and adjusting to a new cultural context in the host country and the development of new social networks (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015).

Social networks – literature review

Maundeni (2001, p. 254) defines social networks as 'people with whom students had contact'. Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama, Fujihara, and Minami (1994) maintain that these networks fulfil three functions: facilitating academic and professional progression; a recreational function in which leisure time is spent together; and a cultural function – providing opportunities for the expression and sharing of culture.

Beech (2015) distinguishes between social networks with strong ties such as close friends and family, and social networks with weak ties such as social network websites. She argues that while stronger ties appear to plant the seeds for an international education and encourage mobility, the weaker ties often provide the key information crucial to the students' final decision. Both Maundeni (2001) and Stoke (1985, in Sawir et al., 2008) use a number of factors related to social network theory, such as composition (characteristics of network members, as well as presence of a partner or close [intimate] other), function (emotional, informational and instrumental support), durability (degree of stability of the individual's link with the network), density (the degree of stability of the individual's links with their network members; dense or close-knit networks, information, ideas and attitudes are likely to be communicated widely throughout the network, while in loose-

knit networks there tends to be greater privacy but also less commonality), accessibility (the perception of the ease with which students made contact with their network members), and reciprocity, frequency of contact and homogeneity (extent to which network members share common social attributes, such as socioeconomic status and cultural values and beliefs).

A number of studies emphasise the role of social networks in the transitional experiences of international postgraduate students. Student societies and friends provide international students with social support and may fill the gap created by the distance from family and friends back home and may also be used as a substitute for the lost social capital (Menzies & Baron, 2014). Social networks provide students with informational support, as well as with academic, administrative and emotional support, and may function as communities of practice (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Elliot et al. (2016) point to the role played by a 'third space' to offset international students' loneliness and to enable their successful academic and social transitions. A 'third space' refers to the informal spaces that foster personal learning, enjoyment and development through friendships, social activities and wider support networks.

Beech (2015) argues that social networks not only support but also determine the geographies and destinations of international students as well as the decision to study aboard. Social networks lead to the normalisation of the travel process, as the members of the network encourage and inform each other of the requirements for such mobility. With globalisation and the emergence of the network society, social networks can span greater distances, physical or virtual, using communication as well as social networking websites (e.g., Facebook, twitter).

Studies have shown that international students find it difficult to develop social networks with local students (McFaul, 2016; Sawir et al., 2008). However, Montgomery and McDowell (2009) suggest that international students do not necessarily need to form academic and social bonds with local students, since they develop a strong international community that supports their learning. Therefore, contact with local students remains on the periphery for most international students.

Sawir et al. (2008) adopt a more critical stance on social networks. They maintain that although networks are desirable they are not a universal panacea for combatting loneliness and isolation. In their study they found that while the majority enjoy networks, the majority also experience loneliness. They suggest that the quality of the network, especially its cultural content, is more important than the quantity. They argue that same-culture networks, where co-nationals or people with similar backgrounds support the transition to a new culture, have an advantage.

A number of studies explore African international students' experiences of social networks. Maundeni (2001), in a study on the role of social networks in the adjustment of African students to British society, found that members of student networks largely comprised other African students and that contact among them was dense. These networks can be supportive, but also a source of stress. Supportive functions included the provision of emotional, informational, spiritual and financial support, advice and social companionship. Non-supportive aspects of network members included discrimination, domination and gossip, and students' inability to improve their knowledge of English and to learn about the cultures of the host country. This arose from what the students called 'too much' contact with students from their own region. Interestingly, Hyams-Ssekasi et al.

([2014](#)) argue that even though African students come from collectivist cultures, characterised by a high degree of support and close bonds with friends and members of the extended family (Eaton & Louw, [2000](#)), there is also a cultural tendency not to burden others with one's problems. Consequently, students do not always benefit from the support that their social network might provide.

Most of the above studies on social networks do not differentiate between postgraduate or undergraduate students. Research that explores the formations, advantages and limitations of social networks in the adjustment of international doctoral students to their 'host' countries is limited (Van Mol & Michielsen, [2015](#)). This article aims to enter the debate by exploring the role that social networks play in the transitional experiences of international African doctoral students in South Africa. It also asks how the collectivist culture of Africa, and the African philosophy of ubuntu,[1] which embraces humanity to others, promoting caring for others and community values (Venter, [2004](#)), influences these experiences.

Methodology

This article is based on two sets of interviews. The first set was conducted by the first author between 2014 and 2015 as a part of a larger mixed-methods study on the experiences of international doctoral students at one of the largest public university in South Africa. Forty-seven per cent of all doctoral students enrolled at the university in 2013 were international students (732 students out of 1533), 82% of whom were from the SADC region and the rest of Africa.

The first set of interviews pointed out the role of social networks in the socialisation experiences of international doctoral students, which became the focus of the second set of interviews ([Table 1](#)). The latter interviews were conducted in 2017 by the second author. Since the first author was South African, and the second author had previously been an international student from a SADC country, the latter was able to obtain in-depth insights into the topic as students were more open to sharing their experiences with her.

Twenty-three (23) students from various geographical locations and from eight different disciplines were interviewed ([Tables 1](#) and [2](#)) after ethical clearance was provided

Table 1. Participants 2014–2015.

Gender	Home country	Faculty
M	Tanzania	Education
F	Nigeria	Education
M	Zimbabwe	Education
M	Nigeria	Education
M	Uganda	Education
M	Zambia	Education
M	Nigeria	Natural Agricultural Sciences
M	Zimbabwe	Education
M	Eritrea	Economic & Management Sciences
M	Uganda	Education
F	Kenya	Humanities
M	Swaziland	Natural Agricultural Sciences
F	Nigeria	Education
M	Malawi	Health Sciences
F	Zimbabwe	Natural Agricultural Sciences

Table 2. Participants 2017.

Gender	Home country	Faculty
M	Nigeria	Veterinary Sciences
M	Cameroon	Food Science
M	Nigerian	Mechanical Engineering
M	Kenya	Natural Agricultural Sciences
M	Zimbabwe	Food Science
M	Swaziland	Electrical Engineering
F	Zambia	Education
F	Lesotho	Law

by the university. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using Atlas.ti. Particularly, the grounded theory approach was employed to analyse the data. The first step in the analysis involved reading through the data in order to get familiar with it. After line by line coding, the data was organised into themes and sub-themes. The relationships among the themes were used to understand the role that social networks played in the transitional experiences of the participants.

The nature and functions of the international doctoral students' social networks

For most students, the academic network was the most important one as it relates directly to their reason for coming to South Africa. While some participants maintained that they worked on their own in their specific topic, others had good networks and communities of practice. The experience often depended on the discipline, the department and on the individual supervisors:

> I'm so privileged again to be under the current supervisor. … He's a man that understands team work … So we have like 12 postgraduate students under him currently, both masters and PhD … you are depending on each other, yet you are independent. (Nigerian student, Natural Agricultural Sciences)

> I was also involved in the malaria project that is happening in Limpopo … my supervisor engaged me in that project. (Malawian student, Health Sciences)

Several participants maintained that they did not feel part of the department and that they 'only see their supervisor in the department' (Nigerian student, Education). Even though some departments hold regular seminars, these do not always help to create an academic network:

> We have … seminars where you sit and hear somebody presenting and then … you have a few questions, you have a small discussion and you leave. But we don't actually have meet-and-greet type of functions. (Zimbabwean student, Natural Agricultural Sciences)

Several faculties, or libraries on campus, have a 'research commons' which is open to postgraduates:

> The research commons has been really a pool for learning from one another, even though our courses may not be the same, but things like research, general methods and all that we've been encouraging each other. (Kenyan student, Humanities)

> We have, like, a PhD room where we sit. Yes, we help each other because we're in different stages. (Swazi student, Natural Agricultural Sciences)

In some cases, students draw academic support from their fellow students, filling the gap created by an absent supervisor:

> I feel unsupervised, so I use my friends as supervisors; my supervisor is a dean of a big faculty so he is too busy and I don't blame him … When I write a paper I send it to my friends. (Swazi student, Electrical Engineering)

Communication among the members of the academic network is facilitated by WhatsApp groups and emails. These also help students to expand their academic network beyond their immediate group and create virtual networks. Thus, while strong ties (Beech, 2015) can be maintained among fellow students, the weaker ties often provide important academic input:

> One lady introduced me to a guy who works in my area. I have never seen him, but we are chatting, and I get a lot from him. (Nigerian student, Animal Science)

The academic network is a great source of information about the opportunities for conference attendance, funding, research and other educational matters. It is a functional network and includes all those who can support the students' research. It may be limited or expansive depending on students' agency and departmental context.

The second network that was mentioned by most participants was their religious network. These participants, who were either Christians or Muslims, found their attendance at the church or the mosque most gratifying and a source for emotional support and strength. Religious institutions may be regarded as a 'third space' and help to promote social networks. One Zambian student (Education) explained that the church was the first place she went to in order to meet other people. In addition, an engineering student from Nigeria declared: 'I am Christian, I love God and I believe in God – so if people are like me I can speak with them about spiritual issues'.

One participant, who attended a church where most of the congregation was made up of international students, explained:

> The church has been helpful … the prayer groups have been helpful … We come from nations where prayer is one of the things that is acknowledged in the constitution, so we find when you are at school this is a base, a very strong basis … for encouragement and all that. And so, when we come here you find that one of the things we do first is to find a church … we come together … we console one another. (Kenyan student, Humanities)

Daily or weekly mosque or church attendance provides students with a stable network that meets regularly, even though it does not necessarily provide them with close personal relationships. However, students sometimes find that full commitment to these religious communities is too time consuming which affects the time they need to devote to study.

Even those Christian or Muslim students who do not attend church regularly maintained that they drew much strength and emotional support from their belief in God:

> If I have a big problem, I pray to God. (Nigerian student, Engineering)

> I pray first before I talk to my friends about my issue. (Lesotho student, Law)

These findings support Pergament's (1990, in Sawir et al., 2008) suggestion that God can be viewed as another member of the social network who can help the students to cope.

An essential social network is formed by co-nationals. Co-nationals may include students, family members, and other migrants from the home country. Most students maintain that the co-national network has the strongest ties and is where they feel understood and accepted. The overriding importance of such a social network was expressed by an Engineering student from Nigeria: 'one is only able to survive here because of your fellow brothers and sisters from your country'. International students often establish their co-national network before they come to South Africa in order to secure accommodation, make travel arrangements, obtain facts about their new environment and 'introduce' themselves to South Africa and the university:

> I have some friends who helped me settle in … some local Malawians who are here and helped me get through, especially on a campus like this, where to go – there's a student centre, this is a library. (Malawian student, Health Sciences)

Students find it easy to access the co-national network. Moreover, they use it to discuss personal issues in their own language as well as to discuss the politics at home and their potential future contribution. They often enjoy their 'home cooking', like a Zambian student who described how her co-nationals meet once a week to cook their special food which they bring from home. The co-national network may also provide financial and material support such as accommodation and food. However, this support is limited since most international students have financial constraints. WhatsApp chat groups are often used among co-nationals, which can become overwhelming at times.

It is important to remember that co-nationals are not necessarily a homogenous group. For example, the Nigerian students spoke about the differences between the Yoruba and the Igbo tribes and between the Muslims and the Christians; however, some Nigerian students maintained that being together in South Africa made them closer.

> The Muslim Nigerians are separated from the Christian Nigerians – but less issues between Yoruba and Igbo especially if one speaks the language. (Nigerian student, Mechanical Engineering)

The close co-national network also has its disadvantages. One Zambian student maintained that there is sometimes unhealthy competition among co-nationals. In addition, one Nigerian student maintained that it limited his international exposure. Another Nigerian student confided that she found herself associating with co-nationals whose 'behaviour was strange to [her], because … most of the behaviour that these Nigerians portray here they don't do over there.'

The co-national network often expands to other international students. This network is facilitated by various structures provided by the university, such as the university's international student society. This society organises events and also champions common agendas, such as visas and medical aid. Within this structure, students often congregate by sub-region: West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa.

Some departments also play a role in bringing international students together in an informal way to allow them to share their culture. Students enjoyed this process as it deepened their appreciation of human diversity:

> The department organises … a platform every Friday where we come together, we discuss challenges in our work in a very informal setting … Then there is a programme once in a year, we call it 'Taste of Africa', it's a kind of forum in which different countries can bring

their food and explain what they do in their country, display their culture, and we all enjoy it. (Nigerian student, Natural Agricultural Sciences)

The research commons was often used by international postgraduate students, as local students tend to study at home, or work as lecturers at the university and have their own offices. The same applies to the residence for postgraduate students, which consists mainly of international students. Consequently, while the academic network may include South African students, other social networks often exclude them.

Living and sharing accommodation at the university residence provides students with a ready-made social network where they can link up, watch television in the company of others, or just have someone to chat to when they feel lonely. However, the residence network does not necessarily provide students with emotional or academic support. As one student explained 'eventually you go to your room and you are alone.' Those who live outside the residence are even more isolated unless they share accommodation with close family members or friends. A number of students expressed their agency by actively looking for a 'third space' outside the university, such as joining a choir or a gym or participating in running races.

Social networks are also maintained with family, friends and colleagues in the home country. Social networking websites such as Facebook and WhatsApp, Instagram and so on facilitate ongoing communication between the home and the host countries.

The family network either in South Africa or back home provides students with emotional support. For example, a Cameroonian Food Science student told how he visited his brother who was also living in South Africa whenever he felt 'depressed'. Another Zimbabwean Food Science student stated that she often called her younger sister back home or visited her brother in South Africa for emotional support.

Studying away from home gave students some advantages as well as dedicated time for learning:

> When you come here you concentrate on education because you only come for education. But when you are back home there are other things that can disturb you, like private things … there is a funeral somewhere. (Malawian student, Public Health)

But there is a price to pay for this. Students left their children, spouses and parents behind and had to rely on other family members. This was particularly difficult when the wife of one of the students gave birth, or when another student lost his father and had no one to share his grief with. The sacrifice of the family added to the pressure of the study as well as to the will to succeed:

> You cannot go back, because in Nigeria it is like a curse for you to travel abroad and come back empty or to say I didn't achieve anything. (Nigerian student, Education)

> You see you cannot go back home empty handed, you will be a laughing stock, because the guys I left there have taken teaching positions and they have already built houses, bought cars and you going back there have to start from A, so that was also a motivation [to complete the studies] … It's non-negotiable, it has to happen … so sometimes you pray, and the burden just gets lifted, you cry, I have learnt to cry as a man here, cry for hours, many times. (Swazi student, Natural Agricultural Sciences)

While in many cases family members motivate and normalise student mobility, the negative perceptions that people have about life in South Africa instilled many worries and

doubts in the hearts of the students. These fears were mainly related to the large-scale xenophobic attacks against immigrants and refugees from Africa that swept South Africa in 2008 and that continue in varying degrees to the present day (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014).

In this scenario families can both encourage and discourage students from leaving:

> Far back home before I came here, some of our colleagues talked about South Africa as a country where you go, you study and you enjoy your study, and you can even make use of your degree all over the world. (Nigerian student, Education)

> Another thing I heard about South Africa … that there were no morals … That many young people are juvenile delinquents … and that there's a lot of crime here … When I came it was at a time of xenophobic issues … so I was very very afraid. They even called me from home, come back home. I said … there's no problem, [the city] is somehow safe. (Nigerian student, Education)

> My family did not want me to go to SA because of the xenophobia attacks. I was scared. But I made up my mind. But to my surprise since I came here I did not encounter xenophobia. (Nigerian student, Veterinarian Sciences)

While students obtained advice on personal, academic and social matters from various social networks, some participants emphasised that advice on 'very personal matters' was either obtained from family members or old, close friends back home, signifying the limitations of the support international students get from the social networks created during their studies.

Students' experiences of the social networks

A doctoral journey is a solitary one, and more so for international students. Social networks are mostly voluntary and unstable with members coming and going, and they depend on the students' agency and the structures that are provided by the institutions:

> It does get a bit lonely when you are free and you want to talk or you just want to relax, you want to take a break and go for lunch and then come back and continue working, so it does get lonely, but this is because people have work to do and the schedules are so different, there's no timetable, so people are working when they can, early mornings, late nights and things like that. (Zimbabwean student, Natural Agricultural Sciences)

What most international students were not prepared for was their feeling of being foreigners in South Africa. They expected to feel 'at home' because 'South Africa is a black country' (Nigeria, Veterinarian Sciences), but their experiences were different. One of the main barriers was the language. Language is a politically contested issue in South Africa (Wolff, 2017), which has 11 official languages, nine of which are indigenous languages. Speaking indigenous language is a significant means to establish ethnic identity which still divides South Africa and sets the boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Rudwick, 2006):

> You find people really beaming and happy to greet you in their language … and then when you are not able to reply, you see that the mood changes and that really makes you feel like 'I wish I was home'. (Kenyan student, Humanities)

9

Learning the language is not a solution, 'because then everyone speaks a different language', (Zimbabwean student, Natural Agricultural Sciences). Sometimes speaking a local language is not enough. For example, although Lesotho is an independent country which is completely surrounded by South Africa and thus has a similar culture and language (Lee, 2017), one law student from Lesotho still felt like a foreigner:

> Even though Lesotho is very near and very connected to South Africa and we speak the same language as many other Sotho people in South Africa – we are not considered to be South Africans – they really make you feel like an outsider.

Communicating was even more difficult for students from francophone countries:

> When I first came people could not understand my accent, and I found another friend who had the same problem. It was not easy to establish a network – I spent a year with no one to speak with. I used to come to the class and say 'good morning' but no one answered me, especially the South Africans – maybe they did not understand my accent, or they thought 'he is a foreigner'. (Cameroonian student, Food Science)

Some students tried to explain the South Africans' lack of hospitality to foreigners in terms of their suspicion that foreigners are here to take over their jobs, especially crucial in the face of the high unemployment rate in South Africa. Other students related this experience to the divisive and isolated apartheid past and the lack of exposure and education:

> Because sometimes I felt that this is a product of history … and a good number of South Africans they don't even know how other people from different countries live. Only people who travel frequently and have been exposed to other nations and the way people are treated really appreciate the fact that you are our brother. (Tanzanian student, Education)

There were other factors that increased the feeling of foreignness. Some students felt that South Africa is too Westernised and is not an African country anymore. This finds expression in the mode of dress, and especially in the food:

> In my country we are not used to processed food. (Nigerian student, Engineering)

> Many people in Africa walk around in traditional clothes – but not in a South African city. (Tanzanian student, Education)

> In my country people dress more modestly. (Lesotho student, Law)

While students felt themselves to be foreigners on campus, off campus some of them experienced subtle or overt forms of xenophobia:

> So, I find xenophobia to be something … what kind of people are these? … it's very surprising to me; I heard that it happens, but I am now experiencing it. Why should that be? We should be one, we're similar and you should not do that to me as a brother, but they do not see it that way … I always watch my movements wherever I go to. (Nigerian student, Education)

Xenophobia was felt mainly by Nigerians and Zimbabweans, because 'there are so many of us' (Zimbabwean student, Education), but less so by students from other countries. This finding is supported by Lee (2017), who reported that higher percentages of Zimbabweans and Nigerians report nationalism as a source of difficulties on and off South African campuses. One Tanzanian student's experience of xenophobia exemplifies this point:

> I think I've been a victim of discrimination not less than 15 times. All the time they thought that I was from Somalia because of my complexion. The police also frequently disturb me, asking me "stop" where is your passport. I am from Tanzania, I show them [the passport] and they say, "okay sorry". …. When I move through the malls, because I am tall they say "you seem to be from Nigeria, or from Somalia", I say "no".

Students highlighted xenophobia, the 'suspicion' of foreigners and generally locals' non-accommodative attitude to foreigners, as evidence of the absence of an ethos of ubuntu and maintained that South Africans have much to learn from their fellow Africans about hospitality and community. One Swazi student applauded South Africa on its efforts to bring ubuntu back but observed that it was too ambitious for the country to believe that a few campaigns would revive ubuntu in the current generation and he feared that it might remain 'a slogan on a T-shirt'. He explained:

> Life in South Africa is about survival. If I survive, I don't care about the person next to me … you don't feel free to help without gaining anything back … every man for himself … that thing kills the goals of what they want to achieve. (Swazi student, Electrical Engineering)

When international students spoke about networking they referred mainly to their links with black South Africans. Despite the high presence of white South African students in this historically white university, the participants seemed to have had little interaction with them, as was stated by an education student from Nigeria:

> I don't have a white South Africa student that I'm communicating with. They do not share any knowledge with me.

One student reluctantly joined a white dominated non-university choir because the university choir excluded him on the basis of age. Despite his regular positive interactions with the white choir members, the participant said that he was usually uncomfortable in their presence.

> … it's the mentality that the whites are racists … As a black person I have noticed that I am too stiff, but they are flexible … they are welcoming but it's me who is like … why are they nice to me?

On the other hand, a refugee student from Zimbabwe who arrived without any resources was dressed, housed and fed by a white South African fellow student and his church community, as well as by some white university employees. He was able to move beyond the race category:

> My understanding is that the issue of xenophobia or ill treatment that I sometimes receive here had nothing to do with race, it had nothing to do with either black or white but is a personality issue. Just because I think I've been honest with myself – a black man will ill treat me, a white man does something good, a white man does something bad, a black person does something good.

Discussion

While South African universities encourage internationalisation, there is very little published research on the transitional experiences of international students. It is evident that many international doctoral students are not prepared for these transitions. Students often come with both negative perceptions of South Africa, fed by media reports and

anecdotal experiences of family and friends, and with great expectations of being in an 'African country that works' and studying at highly ranked universities (Herman, in press). Their eventual arrival in South Africa dispels some of the negative perceptions while at the same time confronting them with new ones, such as a strong feeling of foreignness among their 'black brothers and sisters' and the absence of ubuntu. Therefore, they often search for social networks that will provide them with a sense of belonging and support and ease the loneliness and challenges of pursuing doctoral studies away from home.

Students belong to a number of networks. Close-knit networks are created by the students' co-nationals, which often extend to broader international networks. These networks fulfil various informational, academic and financial support, as well as cultural identification functions, while much emotional strength is provided by the religious network, functioning as a third space, as well as the family network. While accessing these networks is relatively easy, the findings indicate that students' agency and enabling institutional structures may facilitate the formation of such networks.

International literature on the social networks of African international students in the United Kingdom maintains that African students form their own social networks regardless of countries of origin (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). Our study indicates that in South Africa, students network within the context of their nationality or by sub-region, such as West Africa or East Africa. This might be a function of their number and preference but could also indicate a shift from race-based identification in a white majority country to a national-based identification in a black majority country.

International students did not form substantial networks with black South Africans, while the presence of white South Africans was not really discussed in the interviews. This questions the extent to which international students' experiences are truly international and whether future international links are formed. It also indicates that South African students do not benefit from the rich experiences proffered by their international doctoral fellows and are not exposed to some aspects of internationalisation at home (Harrison, 2015). This is a source of concern, as doctoral student mobility should not be only about getting a good degree. To have an impact on the world, doctoral students as future knowledge workers should develop intercultural skills and global citizenship, as well as strong international networks. However, the strong co-national network and the separation between international and local students may hinder this goal.

Further research is needed to explore the attitudes of South African doctoral students towards international African students, as well as the sustainability of the links and collaborations of international and national alumni that are formed during their doctoral studies in South Africa. If South Africa wishes to remain a regional hub for doctoral education, universities should do more to facilitate the establishment of diverse networks that will support the students' transitional experiences and enhance intercultural skills in all students and academics.

Note

1. Ubuntu is a word that originates from a Zulu proverb "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" which literally means: 'I am because we are, and therefore, we are because I am'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Antony, J. S. (2002). Re-examining doctoral student socialization and professional development: Moving beyond the congruence and assimilation orientation. In *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 349–380). Dordrecht: Springer.

Bakewell, O. (2010). Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *36*(10), 1689–1708.

Beech, S. E. (2015). International student mobility: The role of social networks. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *16*(3), 332–350.

Crush, J., & Ramachandran, S. (2014). Xenophobic violence in South Africa: Denials, minimalism, realism, casual factors and implications. *Migration Policy Series*, *66*, 1–44.

Dang, X. T., & Tran, L. T. (2017). From 'somebody to nobody': International doctoral students' perspectives of home-host connectedness. In L. T. Tran & C. Gomes (Eds.), *International student connectedness and identity: Cultural studies and transdisciplinarity in education* (Vol. 6, pp. 75–91). Singapore: Springer.

Dawson, J., & Conti-Bekkers, G. (2002, February 5–6). *Supporting international students' transitional coping strategies. In Focusing on the student.* Proceedings of the 11th Annual Teaching and Learning Forum.

Dominguez-Whitehead, Y., & Sing, N. (2015). International students in the South African higher education system: A review of pressing challenges. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *29*(4), 77–95.

Dzansi, D. Y., & Monnapula-Mapesela, M. (2012). The nature of international student's adjustment problems in a South African university: Implications for international students and student administrators. *Journal for New Generation Sciences*, *10*(3), 28–49.

Eaton, L., & Louw, J. (2000). Culture and self in South Africa: Individualism-collectivism predictions. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *140*(2), 210–217.

Elliot, D. L., Baumfield, V., & Reid, K. (2016). Searching for 'a third space': A creative pathway towards international PhD students' academic acculturation. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *35*(6), 1180–1195.

Gopaul, B. (2015). Inequality and doctoral education: Exploring the 'rules' of doctoral study through Bourdieu's notion of field. *Higher Education*, *70*(1), 73–88.

Harrison, N. (2015). Practice, problems and power in 'internationalisation at home': Critical reflections on recent research evidence. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *20*(4), 412–430.

Herman, C. (In press). International doctoral students coming to South Africa - exploring pull and push factors. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa – CODESRIA*.

Hyams-Ssekasi, D., Mushibwe, C. P., & Caldwell, E. F. (2014). International education in the United Kingdom: The challenges of the golden opportunity for black-African students. *Sage Open*, *4*(4), 1–13. doi:10.1177/2158244014562386.

Lee, J. J. (2010). International students' experiences and attitudes at a US host institution: Self-reports and future recommendations. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *9*(1), 66–84.

Lee, J. J. (2017). Neo-nationalism in higher education: Case of South Africa. *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(5), 869–886.

Maundeni, T. (2001). The role of social networks in the adjustment of African students to British society: Students' perceptions. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *4*(3), 253–276.

McFaul, S. (2016). International students' social network: Network mapping to gage friendship formation and student engagement on campus. *Journal of International Students*, *6*(1), 1–13.

Menzies, J. L., & Baron, R. (2014). International postgraduate student transition experiences: The importance of student societies and friends. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *51*(1), 84–94.

Montgomery, C., & McDowell, L. (2009). Social networks and the international student experience: An international community of practice. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *13*(4), 455–466.

Pithouse-Morgan, K., Morojele, P., Pillay, D., Naicker, I., Chikoko, V., Ramkelawan, R., & Rajpal, R. (2012). 'The air is hostile … ': Learning from an African international postgraduate student's stories of fear and isolation within a South African university campus. *Alternation*, *19*(2), 73–93.

Pergament, K. I. (1990). God help me: Toward a theoretical framework of copying for the psychology of religion. *Research in Social Scientific Study of Religion*, *2*, 195–224.

Robinson-Pant, A. (2009). Changing academies: Exploring international PhD students' perspectives on 'host'and 'home' universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *28*(4), 417–429.

Rudwick, S. I. (2006). *Language, identity and ethnicity in post-apartheid South Africa*: *The Umlazi township community* (Doctoral dissertation). University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2008). Loneliness and international students: An Australian study. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *12*(2), 148–180.

Stokes, J. P. (1985). The relation of social network and individual difference variables to loneliness. *Journal Personality and Social Psychology*, *48*, 981–990.

Tanaka, T., Takai, J., Kohyama, T., Fujihara, T., & Minami, H. (1994). Social networks of international students in Japan: Perceived social support and relationship satisfaction. *The Japanese Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *33*(3), 213–223.

Van Mol, C., & Michielsen, J. (2015). The reconstruction of a social network abroad. An analysis of the interaction patterns of Erasmus students. *Mobilities*, *10*(3), 423–444.

Venter, E. (2004). The notion of ubuntu and communalism in African educational discourse. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *23*(2-3), 149–160.

Weidman, J. C., Twale, D. J., & Stein, E. L. (2001). *Socialization of Graduate and Professional Students in Higher Education: A Perilous Passage?* ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Volume 28, Number 3. Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. Jossey-Bass, Publishers, Inc., 350 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94104-1342.

Woldegiorgis, E. T., & Doevenspeck, M. (2015). Current trends, challenges and prospects of student mobility in the African higher education landscape. *International Journal of Higher Education*, *4*(2), 105–115.

Wolff, H. E. (2017). Language ideologies and the politics of language in post-colonial Africa. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus*, *51*(1), 1–22.