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Globalization of Higher Education in South Africa

Donald L. Ariail

Abstract

Despite being the smallest of the BRICS in population and having a relatively small number of public institutions of higher education (HE), South Africa (SA) has several world class universities and is the HE leader on the African continent. This paper presents an overview of various demographic aspect of HE in SA including types of institutions, popular fields of study, faculty demographics, government expenditures on HE, and the availability of financial aid. However, the focus of the paper is on globalization factors such as distance education, the presence of foreign university branch campuses, SA as a destination for international students (especially for students from southern Africa), and the regional and global rankings of SA universities. The research presented is informed by the author's personal experiences as a doctoral student at the University of South Africa. The paper concludes with a brief critique.

Introduction

South Africa (SA) is one of the five emerging world economies; it is the “S” in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Since apartheid ended, the SA higher education system has undergone rapid growth and structural (including major consolidations) and cultural transformations (Karodia, Shalkh & Soni, 2015). Similar to the HE situation in India (Jayaram, 2013), there is a focus in SA on the color and ethnicity of students, faculty and staff. Despite ongoing racial tensions and structural problems (cf. Moloi, Mkwanazi & Bojobotseha, 2014), SA has a number of world-class universities and is the higher education leader on the African continent. This short paper, which is focused on the global aspects of higher education in SA, proceeds as follows: first, a brief review is made of some of the pertinent SA higher education demographics. Next, a few of the highlights of the international aspects of higher education in SA are presented. And, in conclusion, a brief summary and critique is offered.

Demographics

Institutions of Higher Education

Higher education in South Africa (SA) is delivered in both public and private higher education institutions (HEI). As of 2012, the latest year for which detailed statistics are available, there were 23 public HEI (two more public institutions were added in 2014) and 119 private HEI. Total student enrollment was 1,050,841: 953,373 (90.7%) in public institutions and 97,468 (9.3%) in private institutions. The public HEI system includes 11 traditional universities, six universities of technology, and six comprehensive universities (Department of Education and Training, 2012). The remainder of this paper is focused on the 23 public HEI.

Students and Faculty

The study of humanities is the most popular (n = 397,792; 41.7%) field of study, followed by business and management (n = 282,299; 29.6%), and science and engineering

(273,282; 28.7%). In addition, 84% of these public HEI students are at the undergraduate level: 2.4% are occasional students, 29.5% are pursuing undergraduate certificates or diplomas, and 52.5% are pursuing an undergraduate degree (Department of Education and Training, 2012).

HEI faculty in 2012 totaled 51,573: 26,865 (52%) men and 24,704 (48%) women, and 17,451 (33.8%) permanent faculty and 34,122 (66.2%) temporary faculty. Permanent faculty qualifications included 34.1% with master's degrees and 38.6% with doctoral degrees (Department of Education and Training, 2012).

Higher Education Expenditures

The 2012/2013 budget for HEI was 24.3 billion rand (subsequently indicated by “R” before the amount). The amount allocated by the SA government to HEI has steadily increased each year since 2007/2008 when the HEI budget was R13.1 billion—an increase of about 85%. However, in each year since 2007/2008, the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) budgeted for HEI was less than 1%—0.76% of GDP was budgeted for 2012/2013 (Council on Higher Education, 2012). In comparison, in 2008 when SA allocated .63% of GDP to public universities (Council on Higher Education, 2012), the US spent 1.0% of GDP and the BRICS countries of Russia and Brazil spent .9% and .8% of GDP respectively (Altbach, 2013).

Tuition

Student paid tuition accounts for 30-35% of HEI funding. The average tuition paid by students in 2012 was about R21,689 (Council on Higher Education, 2012). A US context is provided by the present author who is pursuing a distance doctoral degree at the University of South Africa (Unisa). When in March 2015 he paid the annual program charge, including tuition, fees and a foreign levy, the total amount was R30,470 which equated to a payment of \$2,616.

Financial Aid

Financial aid is primarily provided to qualifying students through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). In 2012, NSFAS provided 202,524 students with a total of R5.87 billion. For 2015 the NSFAS budget is R9.5 billion which appears to be insufficient to meet student demand for financial aid (Department of Education and Training, n.d.). For example, at the University of Johannesburg, their “. . . allocation [of the NSFAS budget] allowed it to assist 7,463 students, leaving 4,378 who met the requirements but could not be helped” (Hartley, 2015).

Highlights and Major Points

Distance Education

Distance education has significantly impacted the internationalization of higher education in South Africa. According to a report by the International Education Association of South Africa, 32,500 (44.6%) of the 72,875 international students studying in SA in 2012 were distance students (as cited in MacGregor, 2014). While the majority of students receive contact instruction, a relatively large percentage of students receive instruction at a distance. Since 2007,

the distance mode of instruction has increased from 38.8% to 40.6% while the contact mode of instruction has decreased from 61.2% to 59.4%.

Most distance students are now enrolled at Unisa, which is a distance dedicated, comprehensive university. In 2005, this institution “. . . became the sole provider of distance learning in . . . [South Africa]” (University of South Africa, n.d. b). Gray (2013, p. 246) presents Unisa as “. . . an example of how the demand for online education is being met in a developing economy.” According to Professor Mandla Makhanya, Unisa’s Vice-Chancellor, Unisa, the largest provider of online education in Africa, “. . . is a seminal partner in the . . . [African Virtual University] platform [which] address[es] the need for higher education on the African continent” (University of South Africa, n.d. b, para. 6). The African Virtual University (n.d.), which has “. . . the mandate of significantly increasing access to quality higher education and training through the innovative use of information technologies, . . . work[s] across borders and language barriers . . .” (Virtual University, n.d., paras. 1 & 6).

Branch Campuses

As of June 8, 2015, the Cross-Border Education Research Team (2015, C-BERT) reports that SA has five branch campuses. Two are hosted by universities in the Netherlands, and one each by universities in Australia, India, and the United Kingdom. C-BERT defines a branch campus as “an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; engages in at least some face-to-face teaching; and provides access to an entire academic program that leads to a credential awarded by the foreign education provider” (Cross-Border Education Research, 2012, p. 1, para. 1). Of the BRICS, only China has more branch campuses than the five in South Africa (Cross-Border Education Research, 2012). The number of branch campus in the BRICS has grown since 2011 when China had 13 compared to zero for the other four countries, including SA (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012).

International Students

According to Higher Education South Africa (2012), in 2011 international students were 7.8% of total enrollment. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013) listed SA as the only country on the African continent that was a destination for international students—Russia was the only other BRICS country that was an international destination.

In a study of 1,700 international students in SA, Lee and Sehoole (2015a, 2015b) found that the majority (74.3%) of international students in SA were from the African continent. For these students, higher education in SA is perceived to be of higher quality, affordable, and to provide an entry point into the regional, continental and global work force. On the other hand, Lee and Schoole (2015b) indicated that most non-African students are often drawn to SA higher education for other reasons, such as interest in the African culture (Lee & Sehoole, 2015b). However, the present author, who is located in the US, was drawn to pursuing a doctoral degree at Unisa based on his perception of the high quality and prestige of Unisa along with the programs relatively low cost in US dollars.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), of which SA is a member, was established in 1992. It is voluntary organization of 15 countries (including SA) that promotes cross-border cooperation (Southern African Development Community, n.d.). Chien and Kot (2011) found that in 2009, 48% of the students from SADC countries who studied outside of their country chose SA as their destination. Interestingly, they noted that while SA was a

destination for international students, it had a small percentage of students studying abroad: “. . . fewer than 6,000 students studying abroad, representing about 0.1% of its tertiary-age population” (Chien & Kot, 2011, p. 10). The lack of students out-bound from SA is perhaps related to the perceived quality of its tertiary education system, which is evidenced by the regional and global rankings of a number of its higher education institutions.

Regional and Global Rankings

Several rankings of universities in Africa indicate the regional and world-class standing of SA universities. The Center for World University Rankings (CWUR) for 2014 has four SA universities included in its top 500 rankings with no other African country represented. CWUR also indicates that the top five of the ten best universities on the African continent are located in SA. The QS World University Rankings for 2014-2015 listed four SA universities and one Egyptian university in its top 500 rankings. The Shanghai Academic Rankings of World Universities (2014) includes five SA universities in its rankings of 500 universities. And, SA was the only country in Africa with universities (three rankings) in the top 400 rankings of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings for 2014-2015. Given that there are only 23 established public universities in SA, having five (21.7%) of the universities so highly ranked, especially on the African continent, is indicative of the relatively high quality of HEIs in SA and at least one of the reasons for SA being able to attract so many international students.

Summary and Critique

The higher education system in South Africa is mainly composed of public institutions where two thirds of the faculty are temporary. Quality could perhaps be improved by the hiring of more permanent faculty. However, in order to do so, and also continue its role as a key provider of quality higher education on the African continent, the SA government will need to provide more funding. Compared to two other BRICS and to the US, SA is possibly not devoting an adequate percentage of its GDP to higher education. Budget constraints have resulted in the underfunding of student aid. Consequently, a large numbers of qualified but disadvantaged students are not being served.

From a global perspective, a number of factors have resulted in SA being a leader in providing quality education to international students: for example, perceived quality, low cost, and the high rankings and international reputations of its higher education institutions. It has been very successful in attracting students from continental Africa; especially students from southern Africa. Its distance education system, which is led by Unisa, serves the country, region, continent, and world. The continuing increase in its distance program enrollments accounts for a large percentage of the growth of international students. Further, compared to other BRICS, SA is seen by foreign institutions as an attractive location for establishing branch campuses. Moreover, despite being the BRICS country with the lowest population, having about a third the population of Russia, the next lowest BRICS in population (World Bank Data, 2015), it has a respectable number of world-class universities.

In summary, while the higher education system in SA is strong, it is in need of greater financial support from the government. With greater financial resources, higher education in SA should be able to continue attracting international students while strengthening its human capital in the form of more fulltime, dedicated faculty.

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