

# The Policy and Practice of Internationalization in the Global-South: African International Students' Experiences in South Africa during COVID-19

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## Abstract

*Understanding higher education internationalization is challenging as it includes different dimensions with varied implications for universities. This paper focuses on the recruitment and teaching of international students. It explores the experiences of African international students at two South African universities between 2020-2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Informed by the capabilities approach, the paper draws on Ubuntu and affiliation as key capabilities for an expansive conceptualization of internationalization. The study's findings reveal the intersecting and underlying constraining contexts for international students, exacerbated by the pandemic. Such a micro-level study contributes towards a nuanced understanding of the practice of higher education internationalization in the global South. It highlights the need to reframe internationalization as a reciprocal relationship based on mutual interconnectedness and mutual values that do not just respond to broader neo-liberal narratives but foster student and institutional flourishing.*

**Keywords:** higher education internationalization, capability for ubuntu and affiliation, COVID-19, global-south

## Introduction

Migration scholarship is generally skewed towards the Global North, where most research is commissioned, theories are crafted, and focus areas are decided (Crawley & Teye, 2024). Despite the dominant focus on global South-North movements, more than one-third of all international migration in 2020 occurred in global South countries, more than the share of South-North migration (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). By focusing on global South-South international student migration, this paper contributes to broader debates on migration and the role of higher education (HE) in the global South. The term “global South” is used in this paper as a descriptor in contrast to the global-North. It is not meant as a geographical category but a relational category that considers “historically grown marginalisations within international hierarchies and their epistemological implications” (Berger, 2020, p. 2001).

Internationalization is a complex and expanding area in HE. It includes various dimensions such as the recruitment and instruction of international students, the establishment of international branch campuses, student and staff exchange

programs, internationalization of the curriculum, and partnerships with regional and international institutions (Ali, 2014). We focus on the former. Comprehending international student mobility in HE therefore poses a challenge, given the multifaceted nature of internationalization, and its diverse uptake and implications for universities. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded this complexity as universities had to adapt and ensure the continuity of learning (Du Plessis et al., 2022; Wills & van der Berg, 2024) in a context of educational inequalities worldwide. Universities' reactions to the pandemic were sometimes "fragmented, uncoordinated, and fraught with conflict and ambivalence" (Wang & Sun, 2022, p. 13). For many international students, the impact of the pandemic was worsened by circumstances in their home countries, such as political and economic instability. Consequently, their needs around accommodation, safe return home, and exposure to the pandemic were sometimes overlooked by their host countries (Chen et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020).

Student mobility has increased in recent years with the number of international students growing globally, from 2 million in 2000 to over 6.4 million in 2021 (Migration Data Portal, 2024). This is a result of several factors including the evolution of the knowledge economy, shifting attitudes toward HE, and enhanced job market opportunities for students. Globally, international student migration contributes skills and economic benefits to host countries and universities. Although the commodification of HE driven by a neoliberal ideology, is foregrounded in internationalization practices (Švarc & Dabić, 2017), the impact of international students extends beyond their economic contribution to host countries. Ideally, international students encourage the cultivation of "intercultural understanding and skills for personal, professional and citizenship development" (Knight, 2007, p. 216). Students also aspire to attend tertiary institutions with global recognition (Fakunle, 2021) and for self-formation (Marginson, 2014). Despite the advantages, there is a tension in policy and practice between international students being 'desired' because of their status and economic contributions, and 'unwanted' because of the need for migration control (King & Raghuram, 2013).

Using international student narratives from two South African universities between 2020-2022, this paper theorizes the concept of internationalization from a global South perspective, and how universities can reimagine it in pursuit of a more meaningful student experience. Based on the findings, it argues for a more expansive understanding and implementation of internationalization in HE, characterized by a "move from the eurocentrism of contemporary academic migration scholarship" (Landström & Crawley, 2024, p. 84).

## **Internationalization in South Africa**

Before 2019, South Africa had no internationalization policy and universities implemented individual strategies. Although practiced by all universities, internationalization was of low priority for rural-based and/or historically disadvantaged universities (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2022). Following the apartheid policy of separate development, historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) were established to serve non-whites, and their marginalization has continued to date. Comparatively, historically advantaged universities (HAIs) were established to serve the white population and have better infrastructure, funding, more teaching and research experience, and generate more research outputs and graduates (Myeki and Temoso, 2019). Although non-whites can now access any university, differences prevail in institution's historical, geographical, and operational contexts, priorities, and levels of financial and human resource capacity allocation in general, and for internationalization. Chasi and Quinlan (2021) note that these institutional differences in the funding and type of services for international students depend on the priority assigned to internationalization. For some universities, internationalization is central to institutional strategy, while for others, it competes with more pressing everyday challenges. Thus, HAIs tend to practice and benefit more from internationalization.

The 2019 national policy framework for HE internationalization provided legitimacy and guidelines for the process. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2019, p. 9), internationalization is "an intentional or steered process to incorporate intercultural, international and/or global dimensions into higher education in order to advance the goals, functions and delivery of higher education and thus to enhance the quality of education and research". Despite the policy framework being relatively new, and its implementation affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars have highlighted its limited consideration of the South African context (Chasi, 2021; Heleta, 2021; Quinlan & Singh, 2022; Heleta and Chasi, 2023). This is akin to Fakunle, Kalinga, and Lewis' (2022, p. 25) observation that internationalization policies in the UK are "disconnected from the racialized lived experiences of students, faculty, and administrators". Illustrating the disjuncture between policy goals emphasizing economic imperatives and those advocating for transformative pedagogies in support of students' cross-cultural learning and global connectedness (Lehtomäki et al., 2019), Heleta (2021, para 13) also notes that the policy's current framing prioritizes "linking up with institutions in the global North, [and] profiling South African universities abroad to attract international students and make money". To some extent, this creates tension with the transformation agenda foregrounded in South African HE policy to redress the ills of colonialism and apartheid (Council on Higher Education, 2022). Thus, universities become "caught between the logic of incorporating within a competitive global economy and national concerns for redress and racial equity" (Majee & Ress, 2020, p. 470) which magnified the disruptions, inequalities, and inequities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this

complex context, practicing internationalization “in a Global South context needs to be deliberately interrogated and contextualized in response to local needs and realities” (Chasi, 2021, p. 34).

As with most African HE policies, South Africa’s national policy framework for HE internationalization is informed by generic ideas conceptualized in the global-North and are not always applicable to other contexts. For instance, the most accepted definition of internationalization as “the process of integrating the international dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of an institution of higher education” was proposed by Knight (1994, p. 3). Despite the criticism that this definition is inapplicable to most global South contexts, Knight (2003, p. 1) highlighted that a definition should “not specify the rationales, benefits, outcomes, actors, activities, or stakeholders of internationalization as these elements vary across nations and from institution to institution”. However, some scholars underscore the importance of definitions in “influenc[ing] and guid[ing] strategic directions of higher education systems and institutions” (Heleta and Chasi (2023, p. 262-263). For example, Marginson (2023, p. 2) observes the challenges with “universalising” internationalization and how Knight’s definition “contains a tautology (internationalisation integrates the international) and conceals a raft of assumptions, judgments, problems and issues”. It illustrates how seemingly apolitical and generic definitions are founded on unequal and hierarchical Eurocentric knowledge bases (Heleta and Chasi, 2023; Marginson, 2023) that perpetuate “hegemonic neoliberal capitalist-driven globalization” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021, p. 78). To better suit other contexts, there has been a shift from commonly accepted definitions of internationalization as largely Anglo-Saxon and predominantly English-speaking concepts (Ge, 2022, p. 231). This is key in post-apartheid global-South countries like South Africa where HE policy aims include social justice goals. In contrast dominant ideas of globalization and neoliberalism in HE result in internationalization being framed as a “commodity in the globalised higher education marketplace” (Heleta and Chasi, 2023, p. 266) for which all countries compete equally.

Because HE internationalization in South Africa occurs in a challenging environment characterized by inequality and underfunding (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021), Heleta and Chasi (2023, p. 269) propose a more contextually appropriate definition, aligned with this study’s normative focus. They conceptualize internationalization as “a critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all”. Such conceptualizations can foster international collaboration based on solidarity, tolerance, equity, fairness, and equality (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016) which we believe are encapsulated in the idea of Ubuntu.

Regardless of the initial lack of national policy and challenges with the current framework, South Africa is one of the leading African destinations for international students (Ratshilaya, 2021). According to Quinlan and Singh (2022), the DHET (2021) notes how the number of international undergraduate students dropped from 5.93% in 2015 to 3.09% by the end of 2020 while international postgraduates dropped from 15.82% to 12.94% because of the COVID-19 pandemic, bureaucratic challenges, and xenophobic violence. Despite the falling numbers, South Africa is Africa’s major education hub, enrolling close to 41,000 international students in 2019, mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa (ICEF Monitor, 2023) and the 16 Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. While no current statistics reflect post-pandemic enrolments, we can assume that despite the drop in numbers, most international students still originate from SADC countries. South Africa “owes a moral debt” to most SADC countries that supported the struggle against apartheid, and supplied migrant labour, and investments (Majee and Ress, 2020). Thus, SADC students are treated as home students in terms of fees and accommodation as specified by the SADC Protocol on Education and Training which aimed at promoting regional integration in priority areas of education, training, research, and development (SADC Protocol, 1997). They also live “in a relatively economically and culturally integrated region dominated by South African influence” (Tagliabue, 2022, p. 6). Thus, examining these, and other African students’ integration as part of an international learning experience is crucial to understanding not just educational arrangements, but also broader socio-political relations. This is important given that the policy framework for internationalization “gives some expression to the centrality of Africa as a key theme of decolonisation of higher education on the continent” (Chasi, 2021, p. 34).

Students' desire for experiences in cultural diversity, and the recognition of international education in enhancing global job market opportunities attracts them to countries with relatively well-developed universities like South Africa (Majee and Ress, 2020). By providing learning opportunities to students from different countries, South Africa benefits economically and develops the much-needed human resources in Africa (Mkwananzi, 2021). This positions universities as key contributors to migration, development, and HE. Despite the benefits, several studies illustrate challenges faced by international students including building relationships (Dunne, 2013; Robinson, et al., 2019); feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and general well-being (Sehoole, 2015; Guo & Guo, 2017; Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Soong and Maheepala, 2023); and the digital divide (Bashir, 2021). These challenges were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. On 26 March 2020, South Africa implemented a Level 5 lockdown. This was the highest form of lockdown that prohibited gatherings and the closure of non-essential activities including universities, and national borders. The pandemic caught universities off-guard, although some were better prepared than others. Some universities had in place business continuity plans arising from the challenges of the 2015/16 #Feesmustfall movement while others did not (du Plessis et al., 2022). The business continuity plans outlined

the provision of adequate online teaching and learning resources for staff and students, student residences, the continuity of essential services on campus, and financial sustainability issues (Universities South Africa [USAf], 2020). Institutional operational policies and procedures also directed universities on issues such as student residences (Ibid.). While the lockdown affected both local and international students, the latter were arguably more affected by the restrictions. Thus, this paper examines African international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown.

The theoretical and methodological approaches that guided the study are presented next, followed by the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In Africa, many interactions are centered around the practice of communalism and individual interconnectedness known as Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a worldview and moral philosophy based on the idea that “Umntu ngumntu ngabantu” meaning that “a person is a person through other people” or “I am because we are” (Shutte, 1993, p. 46). According to Mutanga (2024, p. 4), Ubuntu is anchored on interdependence, human dignity, respect, and collective problem-solving. Researchers have used Ubuntu to understand individual and collective social experiences of inclusion and their impact on human well-being. While Mutanga (2024) argues that some of the actions observed during the COVID-19 pandemic reflected a spirit of oneness, we are interested in how these played out in international HE. To understand student's well-being, we draw on Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) and specifically the capability for affiliation to theorize practices of Ubuntu for students during the pandemic. According to Walker and McLean (2013), the capability for affiliation is about social relations, mutual respect, valuing diversity, and understanding one's obligations to others. Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas (2023, p. 242) posit that while Ubuntu offers a moral compass and normative description for developing one's humanness, the CA offers a normative and evaluative framework for wellbeing. They further argue that in HE, the capability for critical affiliation strongly speaks to the principles of Ubuntu such as mutual cooperation, reciprocal support, and community affiliation. We therefore consider Ubuntu a valued capability for student wellbeing, especially important for international students. Combining Ubuntu and the capability for affiliation provides a relational framework applicable to explaining human interconnectedness. In this paper, we are interested in how students i) were able to live with and behave toward others, and ii) experienced a sense of solidarity and mutual respect from others.

The paper examines the role of universities as social institutions that shape HE access, learning, and everyday experiences of solidarity, respect, oneness, and kindness towards international students. It argues for a reframing of the process of internationalization as a reciprocal relationship between universities and students. This requires locating the discourse of internationalization within “broader historical, economic, academic, political, and administrative contexts to question prevailing assumptions and imagine alternative possibilities” (Garwe and Thondhlana, 2023. p. ix). It assigns universities the responsibility to foster more equitable opportunities for internationalization based on social justice and reciprocity, beyond mere rhetoric. In a reciprocal relationship, HE internationalization is seen “as a means of freedom or an instrument for attaining wellbeing, justice, and development” (Lo, 2019, p. 261). To theorize the capability for affiliation for international students through an Ubuntu lens, we focus on the opportunities for these students to form relationships to enhance their learning experience away from home.

### **Ubuntu and Affiliation as a Capability**

Our conceptualization of this capability draws on mutual interconnectedness and values.

#### ***Mutual Interconnectedness***

Ubuntu provides a cultural and intellectual foundation for affiliation by espousing a worldview that promotes interconnectedness and community well-being. Such inclusive practices denote respecting the values of presence, participation, acceptance, and achievement (Lephoto and Adigun (2024, p. 71), all of which are key dimensions of student well-being in our case with African international students. Nussbaum (2000, p. 232) explains the capability for affiliation as being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction, to be able to imagine the situation of another, and to have compassion for that situation. It offers a framework that can assist in making Ubuntu ideas a reality in both policy and practice. As did Calitz (2019), we found that students viewed affiliation as social networks, recognition, identity, and belonging. This capability is expressed through supportive relationships with university staff and peers, and to be recognized as members of the academic community. For international students who are away from home, this capability, as Calitz (2019) argues, is important for integration and navigating a new (and sometimes) different learning environment. Therefore, an Ubuntu and affiliation-inspired approach would include expressions of compassion, kindness, and generosity to and from others. From an institutional perspective,

leaders would make decisions that show empathy, kindness, and compassion to all students. This is especially important if we view HE institutions as communities with common and shared values.

### ***Mutual Values***

Ubuntu promotes inclusivity based on self-respect and treating others with dignity and equal worth. This means not discriminating based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality. Both Ubuntu and the capability for affiliation emphasize the importance of interpersonal connections and the intrinsic value of relating to others. Integrating these ideas into understanding the experiences of international students provides the opportunity to identify empathy and the recognition that human flourishing is embedded in people's ability to engage meaningfully and respectfully with others. HE internationalization should, therefore, be about creating reciprocal relationships that allow both universities and students to flourish. While universities benefit economically and contribute to the public good, students learn disciplinary knowledge, about others, themselves, and how they can contribute to the common good (Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas, 2023). Therefore Nussbaum (2000, p.234) argues for everyone to be "a bearer of value, and an end" without giving primacy to some over others. In this case, foregrounding the economic benefits to universities over international students' valued ends becomes akin to "exploitation", which is about treating "a person as a mere object for the use of others" (Ibid.).

The 1997 SADC Protocol on Education and Training is an example of the centrality of connectedness and intercultural affiliations in South Africa, which is not reflected in international definitions and policies. Although focused on education, the protocol was aimed at promoting regional integration and cooperation. As set out in the protocol, SADC students do not fit the profile of self-funding international customers who pay international fees, despite not being South African (Majee & Ress, 2020). This illustrates the reciprocal and normative value placed on connections and social relations in South Africa, and in HE, which is absent in broader internationalization policies. In the current framing and practices of internationalization, the sense of responsibility and need to ensure international students' well-being is sometimes overlooked.

### **Methodology**

This study used a phenomenological research design. Neubauer et al., (2019, p. 91) define phenomenology as "an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it." From the many forms of phenomenology, this study adopted the transcendental approach which emphasizes the participants' descriptions of their experiences (Ibid.). This design was appropriate for participants to fully describe their lived experiences as international students at South African universities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purposive sampling was employed to select international students from two South African universities, University A, a HAI, and University B, a rural HDI. To better reflect on their experiences, 15 African international students in their final year in 2023 were selected. See Table 1 for student information. Individual semi-structured interviews, consisting of closed- and open-ended questions accompanied by probes, were used to collect data on students' experiences. Data was collected over two months, after obtaining permission from the universities and students. All the students were above the consent age of 18 years, and informed consent was sought only after they understood the study details. Despite the students being from different linguistic backgrounds, there was no language barrier as the participating institutions used English as the medium of instruction.

Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) data analysis steps, data was anonymized and analyzed thematically. The research team read through the transcripts numerous times, highlighting words and phrases with key themes relating to the study objective. This open coding was used to classify meaningful data from the transcripts. After the open coding process, the codes were categorized, with codes that reflected comparable concepts or patterns combined into a single category. Finally, emerging themes were labeled after the observation of trends and patterns in the categories. The themes were then analyzed using the Ubuntu-affiliation capability framework, which enabled us to draw out those relevant to our study. The research team discussed the different codes, categories, and themes to ensure a common understanding and consensus regarding the analysis process.

Guided by excerpts of students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the next section presents the themes emerging from the interviews.

**Table 1***Participants Profiles*

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Course registered for	Year of study at time of interview	University
Charmaine	Lesotho	Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Communication Science	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A
Jerome	Namibia	Bachelor of Arts Honours in Governance and Political Transformation	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A
Daniel	Lesotho	Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Communication Science	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A
Mary	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Arts in Law	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A
Bobby	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Arts in Governance and Political Transformation	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A
Edgar	Ghana	Bachelor of Science Honours in Forensic Genetics	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A
Toby	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Arts in Social Work	4 <sup>th</sup>	A
Jonathan	Nigeria	Bachelor of Science in Life Sciences	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B
Hilda	Kenya	Master of Agriculture	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B
Agnes	Nigeria	Bachelor of Law	4 <sup>th</sup>	B
Noah	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Science in Water and Sanitation Sciences	4 <sup>th</sup>	B
Nick	Zimbabwe	Master of Agricultural Management	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B
Aletta	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Development, Planning and Management (Honours)	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B
Sarah	Zimbabwe	Bachelor of Laws	4 <sup>th</sup>	B
Damaris	Zimbabwe	Master of Economics	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B

## Results

This section presents three key themes shaping student experiences. The first theme relates to the impact of the COVID-19 policy implementation with sub-sections on accommodation requirements and online learning. The second theme examines the bureaucratic challenges experienced by students, while theme three examines the lack of institutional support for international students in the implementation of the policy framework for HE internationalization in and outside teaching. These themes underscore the importance of universities' awareness of the different needs of international and local students in the support they provide. The excerpts denote the anonymized student's name and university, eg. Mary- A.

### **Impact of COVID-19 Policy Implementation**

This theme focuses on how policies related to COVID-19 affected students' accommodation arrangements and online learning.

#### *Accommodation Requirements*

The abrupt request to vacate campus created challenges for international students, some of whom had no alternative accommodation in South Africa and had to return to their home countries. Although there were slight differences between the time given by the two universities for students to vacate campus, students highlighted challenges in the manner it was done:

International students were not allowed to stay. They were given 24 hours to vacate the university. If you find that the number of international students this year has dropped, that could be one of the reasons. They had to go home. And then lockdown happened. They could not study from home. I don't know whether they were able to access Blackboard. They couldn't fetch their gadgets. And remember the borders were locked for a very long time. Those students could not come back. (Agnes- B).

In March, before the university closed, we were told that we were going to have online classes. That was when we, as international students, me especially, felt the rift or the gap. Because we got an email that said all students need to evacuate their residences. We said okay, but we're international students. It's going to take some time to make arrangements. Then you are told that you have about three days to leave. Borders were already closed for some countries, so it put extra expenses on us to be able to leave the country. We had to pay extra money because flights were more expensive, and traveling was more expensive. I think the university could have given a little bit more time to international students or provided alternatives. To just say if you are struggling with travel arrangements, you can stay in the residence until you can leave. Because that's what I saw other universities do. (Jerome- A).

#### *Online Learning*

Another challenge stemming from the need to follow COVID-19 protocols was the move to online learning. Universities had to implement various strategies to save the academic year. While both universities initially faced challenges, University A improved faster than B.

The 2020-year group had I think the worst experience in terms of online learning whereby everything was still being trialed and tested and chopped and changed. By 2021, the university had a certain level of stability in terms of their communication, and it was a bit easier for them to integrate us into some other learning software such as Blackboard and sometimes Microsoft Teams. They (lecturers) were also a bit more comfortable with what they were teaching us. (Toby- A).

I think it being so traditional (University B), not engaging with technology, and not moving with the trends, affected it because everyone now was trying to figure out what was happening. Even the lecturers also had some challenges when they had to present slides, they didn't know how to share their screens, those kinds of things. It was the first time everyone utilized the platform. Because you've never seen an app or website like that, you're stressing about the content that you've been taught. And at the same time, you're stressing about how to utilize the app when you must write. We never had tutorials on how to utilize it or how to access the questions, we had to figure it out. (Nick- B).

## **Bureaucratic Challenges**

Although the bureaucracy associated with international students did not start with COVID-19, it worsened after the pandemic and the resultant lockdown at both universities. Students noted challenges associated with study visa applications at national and university levels. Although necessary, these processes could have been made easier with stronger institutional support. For example, students reported:

Registration is crazy as an international student. I feel like it's not fair, the fact that international students and non-international students are given the same time to complete their registration. Meanwhile, international students are required to present more documents, and some of these documents take long to get. So, sometimes you have a week to register, and you've applied for a study permit, which is probably going to come out in a month. And now you have to tell these people well in advance that you don't have a study permit, that you can't register. So, it's mainly registration for me, because it's the one thing that rocked me for these whole three years, even after COVID. You need a study permit, you require other documents to apply for a study permit like your police clearance, your doctor's form, we must take tests. All those things take time, they're not things you can apply for and then get tomorrow. (Bobby- A).

So, you must apply for a study permit via the Department of Home Affairs. And once you apply, Home Affairs takes a while to respond. And then that permit is required by the university for them to unblock you on their system so that you can register for that year. So, how do you do that? Because personally, this year, I submitted my permit renewal application in January. I still haven't received it till now (in May). And the international office threatened to deregister me because I hadn't submitted a valid permit. And I was like, how is that my fault? I submitted and Home Affairs is taking time. You, as the international office of the university, have to contact Home Affairs and say, okay, these are international students, they need to study, please assist them. However, they didn't do that. I had to start sending emails to Home Affairs, like, hey, I'm still waiting for my study permit, it's required by the university. I mean, I did everything I was required to do as an international student. (Aletta- B).

As an international student, you had to have your papers ready and valid. So, by the time you get your things together, already school has opened. Unlike a citizen who's just registered online and then it's done. For us, you had to go through these million processes. And even if you submit your documents, they take ages to reply. So yes, it affected most international students. Because back then (during the pandemic) you wouldn't go to the offices to renew your permits. It had to be online. And you know online, like I was saying, it's not always that somebody replies to immediately. So, everything was just passive and slow for us. By the time you get registered, it's been three weeks since they opened. You go to class, they're now on chapter four. (Nick- B).

## **Lack of Institutional Support**

In addition to lacking institutional support when applying for visas or during registration, international students also felt that their universities did not provide adequate administrative, technical, and academic support. While the university offices, including the international office, were closed due to the pandemic, communication was said to be conducted online. This theme presents students' experiences of lack of institutional support in general, and then more specifically within the context of online learning. Students explained:

I remember one time I wanted a letter from the international office that stated that I was done with my extended program. I struggled to get that letter because they were not responding to my calls and emails. I even went straight to the international office. There was no one. (Mary- A).

When it comes to support, the university hasn't really communicated with international students in the sense of asking us what we want or about the challenges we are facing. They haven't reached out to us. So, it's a matter of whatever it is that they are doing, we just go along with it. But for them to cater to international students specifically, there hasn't been any specific support. I also didn't think that I had the right to enquire about anything. Because we are not well informed of what as international students, we can have access to or the rights we have. So, most things, if it doesn't come to us, we just keep quiet. (Sarah- B).

The work they do (the international office) is said to be centered around internationalizing the university rather than catering specifically to international students. Although they are said to assist with programs that are run by the School Representative Council International, there is always an emphasis that the programs must have an element of cultural integration that aligns with not only international students but with other local students. But I have not



seen them really assist besides during registration. That is when they are the most active. Other than that, in terms of social support et cetera et cetera, I have not seen it. (Jonathan- B).

### ***Teaching and Learning***

Online learning requires the use of technological tools such as computers, software, and the internet, which are normally provided by universities to enrolled students. However, the pandemic disrupted service provision and while universities provided some support, it was directed towards students in South Africa and local students. Although this benefitted some international students who remained in the country, those who returned home were sidelined.

The university came up with a program that allowed students to collect laptops. While local students' laptops would be paid for by the government, international students like me had to pay. It was not advisable for me to take the laptop because, at the end of the day, it would add to my fees, which I could not pay. So, I mostly used my phone for online learning. (Noah- B).

When COVID started and we had to go online, there was the provision of Global Protect and data for students. But international students weren't accommodated. Whenever I downloaded the Global Protect app, it wasn't working. I remember sending an email in April to ICT to let them know that Global Protect was not working for me because I was not in South Africa, and they only got back to me I think in October. And they could not help. I think there is a misconception that international students have enough money to be able to cater for themselves. And it's a very, very biased misconception. Because we already cough up enough as it is. So, it kind of made me realize how unfair it is in this world. I kind of felt excluded at that moment. (Charmaine- A).

I was staying in Zimbabwe. So, I could not receive the data provided for students. I had to buy my own data, which was very expensive, and I ended up selecting which lectures to attend and which to miss. (Damaris-B)

Online learning was hectic because I had challenges, especially when it came to resources. One would say, oh, you're coming from the city, which is Maseru (Lesotho), so everything is close. But that was not the case. I didn't have a laptop at that time, which was a challenge when it came to studying. I feel like somehow the university could have given us support. They did say they're going to give us... They're going to lend us laptops and there were some forms we had to fill in. But that never happened. It was just a promise. (Daniel- A).

### **Cultivating Intercultural Relations**

This theme presents the challenges students faced in fostering social interactions which are central to an international educational experience. Students mentioned struggling with isolation, anxiety, and abandonment, regardless of COVID. While this was a commonly reported theme in the literature on the impact of COVID-19 in any population, for international students, these feelings were amplified by being in a foreign country.

It was hard because I am used to physical interactions with people. I am a very outspoken and outgoing person. So now I had to shrink myself in and not interact as much. My international status for sure did make it challenging, because as an international student sometimes you do get lonely in terms of having to speak your home language. You are in a space where now you cannot even try and find someone else who comes from the same country as you. I do know that within my residence and even in my class when we were asked if there were international students, I was the only one. So, it does make some interactions a bit difficult because we do not relate in the same manner and do not get the same experiences whether financial or otherwise. (Edgar- A).

I was not even able to socialize, even with the people that I was staying with, because of the language barrier. I speak English and I didn't understand any other local languages. So then to converse, to socialize with others, to ask help from others, it was just difficult because also as a person that comes from my culture, asking things from people, especially people you don't know personally is very difficult. (Hilda- B).

However, in her second year, Hilda was paired with a local student "from whom she got help, which made things easier".

When I got here, it was quite difficult because I was struggling with almost everything, financially, and mentally, I was not okay. I didn't know anyone at the residences. I didn't know how things work in the residence because I've always stayed at home with my mom doing everything. Now I'm all alone, and I'm expected to be an adult and look after myself. There's no one out here in South Africa with me. (Mary- A).

To circumvent some of these challenges, students noted how others from the same countries supported each other:

If I speak to some of my friends in other universities, they have a little bit more support because they have formed organizations that provide support for each other. Whereas here, Namibian students are very dispersed. There's no unity per se and it's always difficult to get in touch with other Namibian students so that we can form our little community. (Jerome- A)

## Discussion

This discussion is based on the themes presented above. Universities A and B approved business continuity plans in 2020 with varying levels of success (USAf, 2020). Although similar, the challenges identified by students illustrate some differences in institutions' levels of support. While some of the problems predate the pandemic (such as well-being issues including loneliness; bureaucratic visa processes; and lack of institutional support during registration), others were a result of it (having little time and support in vacating campus; and online learning complications). Combined, these challenges illustrate how internationalization efforts in South African HE are “determined by the realities of the multilayered asymmetrical context in which we are located” (Quinlan and Singh (2022, para. 7).

Although we agree with the DHET (2019, p. 21) that HDIs might generally have low levels of international relations and are not yet “benefiting from internationalization to the degree that they could”, our findings add another dimension. Building on Chasi and Quinlan's (2021) observation that in HDIs, internationalization can be overshadowed by the competition for limited resources with other institutional priorities, we argue that to some extent, the challenges stem from how internationalization is conceptualized in an apolitical and generic way that does not engage with the country's contextual reality. Ubuntu and affiliation therefore provide a starting point in reframing internationalization in the global South, using South Africa as an example.

### Ubuntu and Affiliation as A Capability

Including ideas of Ubuntu and affiliation in the conceptualization of internationalization would assist in thinking about practices foregrounding wellbeing concerns and interconnectedness between, and among universities and students without over-emphasizing economic benefits to HE institutions. As this study has shown, student narratives before and during the pandemic reveal limited integration in universities. This is also explored in literature from within, and beyond South Africa highlighting the bureaucracy and delays in the verification of qualifications by the South African Qualification Authority, accreditation recognition, and visa processing (Quinlan and Singh, 2022); and feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and isolation (Schoole, 2015; Guo & Guo, 2017; Alharbi and Smith, 2018), which were exacerbated by the pandemic (Soong and Maheepala, 2023). Literature has also examined how friendships between international and host-national students are often segregated by nationality or other socio-demographic factors (Dunne, 2013; Sandel, 2014; Robinson, et al., 2019). In such instances, the “social segregation of international students threatens the availability of diverse ideas, knowledge, and resources” (Robinson, et al., 2019, p. 65). The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing university reactions placed international students in “a more isolated position abroad with less access to public resources due to monetary, informational, language, or cultural barriers” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 1). As part of the university, students should have been assisted in overcoming the challenges they faced. Because Ubuntu and affiliation emphasize mutual respect, compassion, and non-discrimination, national and institutional policy must reflect the need to provide care for those in a condition of extreme dependency (Nussbaum, 2002). This would direct universities on how to uphold their social and ethical responsibility to care for international students and protect their human rights as people prone to insecurity, vulnerability, and precarity due to being in a foreign country (Tran, et al., 2023).

Illustrating the importance of studying in a multicultural environment to expand their educational, social, and cultural horizons (Fakunle, 2021), students' narratives also reveal the value of creating friendships and achieving affiliative functionings. For example, they valued being part of a mutually supportive community and friendships with those from within and outside South Africa. However, these “meaningful forms of affiliation” were sometimes hindered by exclusionary practices (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 106), which the pandemic exacerbated. Although communities comprising students from the same country can provide support, it limits interaction between local and international students (Ratshilaya, 2022), to some extent, defeating one of the purposes of internationalization. The limited support by international offices in fostering affiliative and social relationships exemplifies how universities seem to focus on attracting international students but lack the strategies to ensure their well-being, integration, and cultural exchange once they are enrolled. In this way, universities miss out on possible intercultural exchanges that “may create spaces for critical reflection on personal involvement in education as well as collective actions, practices and policies that sustain as well as constrain education and educational development” (Lehtomäki et al., (2019, p. 219-220). Overlooking student wellbeing maintains a deficit approach where international students are positioned to earn an international degree, and universities benefit economically.

The study therefore highlights the limitations of the existing deficit approach to policy and underscores the need for a different approach to reimagine HE internationalization.

### **Reframing Higher Education Internationalization in South Africa**

Although national policy should not be overly prescriptive and ought to allow room for institutional differentiation, it needs to provide context-specific guidelines equally informed by extrinsic and intrinsic national and HE values. Currently, the broad framing of internationalization provides little contextual understanding of the state of HE in South Africa. It is assumed that individual institutions will craft and implement contextually relevant policies that foster more sustainable and reciprocal international and institutional relations that adequately protect and support international students. However, institutional internationalization policies and practices are sometimes “ad hoc, with low strategic approach and limited impact” (Majee & Ress, 2020, p. 475). Thus, this study’s findings can assist in reimagining internationalization directly and indirectly. The direct approach entails reconceptualizing internationalization policies at the national and institutional levels as a reciprocal process with instrumental and intrinsic benefits to universities and students. The indirect approach requires national policy directed towards redressing existing inequalities by availing institutional support for HDIs, enabling them to equally practice internationalization in a way that fosters development. We discuss these ideas in greater detail, starting with the latter.

South African universities still face inequalities, systematic exclusion, marginalization, and subtle forms of discrimination (Council on Higher Education, 2022, p. 12). It is in this already contested terrain that internationalization is practiced, and sometimes “resentment by South African hosts usually emanates from a sense of insecurity and entitlement, triggered by competition for resources and opportunities (Tomaselli, 2023, p. 2). Internationalization therefore intersects with and reinforces “longstanding patterns of racialized educational inequalities” (Majee & Ress, 2020, p. 464) which in turn, affects international students. Universities attract international students through marketing and recruiting, which require funding and national support. Increased marketization and prominence in rankings then favorably sell universities as international. This is a drawback for HDIs whose capacity development for internationalization is insufficiently addressed in the policy framework which assumes a level playing field for all universities (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2022). Despite universities establishing international offices, their positioning within the institution, function, size, capacity, role, and funding models vary. This determines the extent of the services availed to students (Chasi and Quinlan, 2021). As a HDI, University B was referred to as “*traditional*”, with limited technology and know-how compared to University A, a HAI. Thus, to some degree, HAIs like University A were able to switch and adapt to online learning faster than HDIs. Given fewer resources, the latter were also disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2022; Mtshweni, 2022). Such universities therefore require more targeted support for their daily functions, and to participate at par with other local and international institutions. While well-resourced and independent international offices can comprehensively facilitate internationalization, from initial marketing and student recruitment to graduation, the activities of smaller offices are limited. Although the lack of resources can explain the limited assistance provided to international students, especially at UB, students from UA also noted similar challenges. This points to factors other than the lack of resources, such as policy limitations. This leads us to the direct approach.

Foregrounding the instrumental value of internationalization in policy and practice can result in “a collection of fragmented and unrelated activities” driven by economic and political foundations without a corresponding increase in the importance of academic and social/cultural motivations (Knight & de Wit, 2018, p. 3). The limitations of a minimalistic understanding of internationalization are also noted by Fakunle, Kalinga, and Lewis (2022, para. 10) who through a UK case study, observe how “Western, Anglocentric conceptualizations of internationalization are rarely challenged”. Thus, HE internationalization ought to go beyond a technical and procedural process to being a liberatory and rehumanizing project (Da Silva & Pereira, 2023). A direct approach to reframing internationalization therefore entails reconceptualizing it as a reciprocal process that emphasizes mutual benefits and wellbeing values, alongside economic imperatives for both universities and students.

Although peripheral in the international sense, South African universities are central in their regional contexts (Majee & Ress, 2020). This positions them to lead in policy and practice. For instance, HE internationalization should aim to create “value for the parties involved, including, for example, the development of knowledge and capacity; cultural enrichment; and the development of a global citizenry” (DHET, 2019, p. 23). In practice, this can be linked to Article 7(B) 1(d) of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training which underscores the need “to promote student and staff exchange programme[s] negotiated on a bilateral and multilateral basis by the sending and receiving universities for educational purposes and to promote cultural ties and engender commitment to the region” (p. 12). While current practices encourage student and staff exchange, as this study has shown, the advertised intercultural exchange is, in practice, limited. This is similarly highlighted in Tagliabue’s (2022, p. 20) study which revealed “the often-neglected experiential aspect of international student life at South African universities” where students felt marginalized and denied a voice. While

international relationships are not always easily initiated and at times not desired by students (Robinson, et al., 2019), they need to have the option to choose them if they wish. If informed by Ubuntu and affiliation values and their emphasis on community and interconnectedness, internationalization processes would not be delegated to the international office alone. Because HE internationalization affects international and local students, national governments, and academic and non-academic staff, its practice requires connections between various actors at different national and institutional policy levels (Ge, 2022, p. 230). It would thus require wide stakeholder consultation, buy-in and collaboration to overcome some of the challenges experienced by international students, including those highlighted in this study. As Marginson (2023, p. 14) highlights, the lack of a relational structure is one weakness in Knight's definition of internationalization, and by extension, in the South African policy. Continuing with the example of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training, involving different stakeholders such as representatives of SADC member states, the DHET, South African HE, local and international student representatives, and those from key ministries such as the Department of Home Affairs would help to align South Africa's internationalization goals with those of other member states in contribute towards value creation . Drawing on such existing links to center wellbeing and foster mutual interconnectedness would help to reimagine policy and practice.

## Conclusion

This paper examines the disjuncture between HE internationalization policy and practice using international students' experiences. It highlights the gaps where the potential of internationalization in fostering a knowledge of and experiences of different cultures, interconnectedness, and wellbeing is advertised but not fully realized. In practice, there are limited structures to support this, if at all. The paper has highlighted the need for more a contextual conceptualization and practice of internationalization. . This can be achieved by an awareness of the multiple realities of international students and their inclusion in teaching and non-teaching university activities. Understanding international students' HE experiences helps to identify conditions that support their flourishing and enables universities to contribute to human development. In this way, universities do not just adopt policies and respond to broader neo-liberal narratives but reshape them in support of more contextually inclusive forms of development and affiliations. This would contribute to the conceptualization of internationalization as a reciprocal relationship where international students bring money and their experiences, improve university rankings and practices of institutional inclusion while also getting an education and an intercultural experience that enables them to flourish and live a life that they have reason to value. Reframing internationalization as a reciprocal process fostering the expansion of all universities and international students' wellbeing would equip global-South countries to participate in and contribute to global HE on their own terms.

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