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FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO FURTHER THEIR TERTIARY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: A STUDY OG THE GABONESE STUDENTS IN CAPE TOWN

by

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Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Technology: Business Administration

in the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences

at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology

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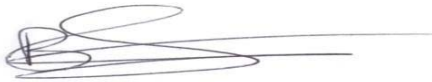**Co-supervisor: Dr M Twum-Darko**

District Six, Cape Town
October 2020

DECLARATION

I, Matt Jefferson Bykanga, declare that the contents of this dissertation represent my own unaided work, and that the dissertation has not previously been submitted for academic examination towards any qualification. Furthermore, it represents my own opinions and not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

November 2019
Signed   **Date**

ABSTRACT

Until recently, the dynamic of international student mobility saw international students deciding to study in the countries of the western world. The USA, the UK, France, Germany, Canada and others were attracting most of them. Hence, academic researches about this phenomenon focused more on students in or going to those countries.

However, the patterns of international student mobility have evolved, and new destinations have appeared to fit the requirements of prospective students. Those destinations comprise regions of the world, which a couple of years ago were not regarded as the first option for many students. Thus, nowadays the Middle East, Asia or Africa have become actors of the flow of international students. In Africa, South Africa plays a central part in attracting an important share of international students from and to the continent.

Nonetheless, despite noticing the change in the patterns of international student mobility, few studies focus on the growing African international student mobility, hence little empirical literature has been published. Deciding to study abroad is not easy, as it requires taking into consideration multiple factors related to the host nation. In light of the above, this study focused on the factors influencing international students to further their tertiary education in South Africa, taking Gabonese students in Cape Town as a case study.

Therefore, in order to explain those factors, the study attempted to determine the factors influencing Gabonese students to study in South Africa; to investigate the challenges faced by Gabonese students while studying in South Africa; to explain the advantages for Gabonese students while studying in South Africa, and to explain the benefits that South Africa could derive from international students.

The qualitative method was used with a case study approach; data were collected using non-probability sampling through face-to-face interviews; data were analysed by content analysis. A total of 25 Gabonese students registered in different institutions within the City of Cape Town took part in this study. Their rights to remain anonymous, as well as their privacy and liberty to withdraw from this study, were respected.

The findings revealed that the decisions of Gabonese international students were influenced by factors such as relatives or friends, learning English, financial aspect and scholarships. However, they faced numerous challenges such as academic writing, learning difficulties, social grouping, physical and verbal abuses, to name a few. Nevertheless, if they still chose South Africa as their host nation, it was because more advantageous factors were involved in

their decision-making process, factors such as satisfactory fees; affordable cost of living; less student unrests, and a good quality of education.

The findings would allow a deeper understanding of the factors involved in the decision-making process of international students, in order to better plan recruitment policies to attract international students. The study then provided five main recommendations: to create awareness among students; to advise higher institutions of education in South Africa; to notify the Department of Higher Education; to alert the Republic of South Africa; to sensitize the Republic of Gabon. Lastly, the study will expand the empirical literature about international student mobility with specific reference to inter-African student mobility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all those who believed in me.

This work is also dedicated to:

- My daughter Lelothando Gisele Bykanga;
- Both my grandmothers, MAYAOURI Monique and GUIÉNAMAMBOU Marie, your grandson *ku rhambilie nguesi*: I so wished you could see how beautiful your great-randdaughter is, but everything God does is good;
- Both my grandfathers, PAMBOU Benoit and NYONDA Alexandre, I was too young when you passed to realise how much I would be missing you; this work is also because of you.
- To my late friends and classmates Allen Mafodya and Chris Divoko: your memories live among all of us who knew you; rest in peace, my friends.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DHA	Department of Home Affairs
EU	European Union
PHEI	Private Higher Education Institutions
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
VFS	Visa Facilitation Service

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GLOSSARY

International students: Those "individuals enrolled in institutions of higher education who are on temporary student visas" (Andrade, 2006:134). In other words, international students represent the non-citizens within the student population, who are registered for an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification in their host country.

Student mobility: The outward flow and inward flow of international students that decide to cross boarders to engage in education activities (ACE, 2018).

Tertiary education: Regarded as "any type of education pursued beyond the high school level. This includes diplomas, undergraduate and graduate certificates, and associate's, bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees" (Learn.org, 2018). It could also be stated that it refers to any educational cursus that is pursued by an individual after a secondary level of education.

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction and background

In a world of consumption and internationalisation, people always seek what is best for them. This phenomenon touches all aspects in the lifetime of humans, including education. Nowadays, there is an academic need to cross borders to seek better education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2013 the world counted 4.1 million students who were studying in a foreign country (UNESCO, 2018a). Education is vital for the socio-economic development in countries of the third world. Alemu (2014:82) stated that studying abroad was part of the academic capacity-building strategy to restructure the socioeconomic and political standing of that region. Since the fall of Apartheid, this dynamic has not spared South Africa, as the country has welcomed students from various countries. According to the statistics on post-school education and training commissioned by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), in 2016 there were 127 529 foreign students enrolled in South African institutions of higher education (South Africa, 2018:30). These statistics are the result of an increasing number of foreign students choosing South Africa as their host nation. Over the past two decades, the number of foreign students in South African universities has "grown dramatically". In fact, since the year 2007, the number of international students within the country increased by 8%. Among them, 72% are from Southern Africa, with most of the students hailing from the Southern African Development Community (SADC), 17% hail from other African countries, and 11% from the rest of the world (MacGregor, 2014; Spooner, 2015).

African universities are facing challenges such as lack of funding, poor research quality, poor infrastructures and excessive demand which all contribute to making the task of educating African students harder than it has to be (Powell, 2015). However, from the above-mentioned statistics, one can deduce that South African tertiary institutions of education are doing fairly well within Africa. Thus, this situation could stimulate African students to find alternative options to better quality education in South Africa rather than going to the USA, Europe or Asia. Among 380 376 African students globally in the year 2010, 57 321 of them registered in South African institutions. This represents 15% overall and ranked South Africa as number two behind France, but ahead of developed countries such as the UK (3rd) and USA (4th) (Spooner, 2015). This is evidence that the migration pattern has shifted or rather evolved regarding the perception of education in Africa. It has made South Africa one of the preferred destinations for building international human capital among international students and particularly for African students (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:828).

The importance of tertiary education has pushed African students to migrate. This trend also affected Gabon, a country with an estimated population of 1.9 million from the central African region (The World Bank, 2018a). Although the Gabonese education system has an enrolment rate of 96.4% (The World Bank, 2018a), the country has seen an increasing number of its students preferring to further their education outside the country. Research shows that student outflows are larger if the country has high tertiary demand and a population under 2 million (Kritz, 2013:29), hence the size of students' outflow is evident for Gabon.

However, it was unlikely to see South Africa with an increased rate of Gabonese students flowing into the country for educational needs, due to the obvious language barrier, among other things. Although 52% of Gabonese international students still choose France as their favourite destination, the number of Gabonese international students in France declined from 4205 in 2010 to 3340 in 2015. This figure represents a decrease of 21%, while the figure for South Africa has advanced by 33% within the same period (Campus France, 2017:26).

1.2   Problem statement

Harris (2001:10) stated that the principal factors prompting people to migrate to South Africa are to seek refuge from political persecution, the lack of professional activities in their country of origin, and the need to further their education. Since the internationalisation of higher education, student mobility is an important factor of the international flow (Wei, 2012:107). It can thus be established, that the need for education has created significant human mobility within the country.

Although the mobility dynamic of international students has mostly seen students from poor or underdeveloped countries in Africa leaving to the rich nations of the west (Maringe & Foskett, 2012:3), this pattern is gradually changing. The University of Oxford cited a report from trends asserting that international students' movements worldwide over the last decade is now shifting from "a largely unidirectional west flow to a multidirectional movement" (University of Oxford, 2017:14). Although the mobility of international students in Africa remains focused on some countries, a quick change of destinations is happening (Campus France, 2017:6). Knight and Woldegiorgis (2017:117) affirmed that, despite many challenges, the interregional student mobility in Africa has steadily been increasing since the 1990s and this trend is obvious within the Southern African sub-region.

Despite noticing the growing change of destination of international students moving from one African country to another, very little empirical literature has been published on this phenomenon (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:828). Moreover, scholarly attention is paid to findings of other international hubs of education such as France, the USA, UK and so forth, far fewer

investigations exist on developing countries (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:828; Wilkins, Balakrishnan & Huisman, 2012:415).

The above statement about Africa is further confirmed in the case of Gabon, which has increased the number of students towards South Africa by 33% from 2010 to 2015 (Campus France, 2017:26). These students come to South Africa from different regions, social trajectories and educational backgrounds (Tati, 2010:281), and consider several matters before choosing whether to study at home or abroad (Kritz, 2013:32). Yet little is known about the factors influencing more of them, and especially Gabonese students, to choose South Africa.

The researcher then established that a gap of knowledge existed within this field due to limited availability of academic work pertaining to African students in general and Gabonese students in particular and therefore decided to conduct this study.

1.3   Significance of the study

Although the context in which students from the African continent and other countries decide about where to further their tertiary education differs greatly (Kritz, 2013:32), multiple studies tend to explain the dynamic behind this migration. Though they are no different from other students, there is scant knowledge regarding Gabonese students' outflow to South Africa. The identification of the factors of international student mobility is essential to plan efficient strategies to attract those students (Beine, Noël & Ragot, 2014:41). Therefore, the study could also benefit the various higher institutions of education in South Africa and establish ways to better shape their policies to attract international students. Lastly, this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge about inter-regional student mobility by generating academic knowledge that could help the future generations of students and researchers.

1.4   Research objectives

This research aimed to explain the factors influencing Gabonese students to further their tertiary education in South Africa.
In order to realise this aim, the following research objectives were identified for the study:
(i)   To determine the factors influencing Gabonese students to study in South Africa;
(ii)   To investigate the challenges faced by Gabonese students while studying in South Africa;
(iii)   To explain the advantages easing Gabonese students to further their tertiary education in South Africa;
(iv)   To explain the benefits that South Africa could derive from international students.

1.5   Research questions

The main research question is: What are the factors that influence Gabonese students to study in South Africa?

The following secondary research questions directed the study:

I.   What motivates Gabonese students to choose South Africa as their host nation for tertiary education?

II.   What are the advantages for Gabonese students to study in South Africa?

III. What are the challenges encountered by Gabonese students in South Africa?

IV. What are the benefits of international students in South Africa?

1.6   Preliminary literature review

This section of the study will provide a brief overview of the most relevant theoretical prescripts that will be discussed in-depth within Chapter Two.

1.6.1   Motivations for studying abroad: South African destination

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), over the 30 years, the number of international students grew from 0.8 million to 4.6 million in 2015 (OECD, 2017:287). Ward (2011) argues that the increasing numbers of international students demonstrate that economic matters are not the only factors to take into consideration. Mpinganjira and Rugimbana (2009:2) stated that, regardless of the living conditions in the country of origin, students might undertake international education migration due to their own choices.

According to Lee (1966), the motivations for studying abroad are explainable through two paradigms: the push factors and pull factors theory. Push factors are viewed as the economic, social and political reasons that could prompt students to leave their countries to seek a better academic environment to pursue their studies. On the opposite side, pull factors are those that persuade students to choose a specific country over another as their host nation for academic purposes (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002:82).

1.6.2   Motivations for studying abroad: Gabonese students' motivation

According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002:82), a lack of access to higher education within some countries in Asia and Africa has been the motivation behind the student outflow currently taking place. Gabon is not an exception to these challenges, with a total number of 7129 international students in 2017 (UNESCO, 2018b). The country is facing difficulties that prompted students to decide on studying abroad. Since push factors operate within the

country of origin and will have prompted a student's decision to study abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002:82), an assessment of some of those factors was then done through an explanation of the push factors specific to the Gabonese context.

1.6.3 Advantages of South Africa as a choice for international students

The South African government provides a legal framework for international students, to which they are required to adhere. Various official international agreements and treaties, such as the SADC Protocol on Education and Training of 1997, the Arusha Convention on the recognition of studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other academic qualifications in Higher Education in African States (1981), as well as the Addis Convention of 2014, were implemented and created an attractive environment for international students (South Africa, 2018:18). Therefore, the reputation that South Africa has among students of the continent makes the country an international destination for tertiary education (Lee & Sehoole 2015: 829). Seemingly, a drop in the trend of Gabonese students towards the previously preferred destination France was noticed, to the benefit of other nations, including South Africa (Campus France, 2017:26).

The context in which the choice of the overseas country is made, usually included the advantages the country offers. South Africa provides a large number of tertiary institutions with 26 universities and 123 private higher education institutions (PHEIs) (South Africa, 2018:9), which allow Gabonese students different perspectives in terms of courses in which they would like to enrol. Additionally, South Africa provides a trustworthy academic environment for Gabonese students. They no longer need to travel to western countries to receive a good quality of education, judging from the three South African universities within the top five African universities (The World University Rankings, 2018).

1.6.4 Advantages of South Africa as a choice for Gabonese students

Although tertiary education is not free in South Africa, the tuition fees are deemed affordable, compared to western countries, such as the UK. Undergraduate students who are not from the European Union (EU) could pay up to four times more compared to the UK and EU students, while international students pay eight times less in South Africa (Spooner, 2015). Among other advantages, the use of English as a medium of learning and communication is a non-negligible factor into take in consideration (Tati, 2010:291). It enables Gabonese students to have an additional language apart from French and give another advantage for employment as English is commonly spoken in all business places. The immigration requirement procedures have also been revised by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA). The establishment of a critical skills list could be beneficial to international students as an opportunity to seek employment within South Africa at the end of their studies (Intergate-

immigration, 2019). It could be claimed that the South African tertiary education system plays a pivotal role in retaining young African graduates within the continent, which made student mobility a case worth studying in-depth (MacGregor, 2014). However, the human capital development that the country has espoused should be understood through the prism of the advantages it has over other countries in Africa (Lee & Sehoole 2015: 830).

1.6.5   Challenges of South Africa as a choice for international students

Although studying in South Africa is beneficial for international students, it should also be noted that it has some challenges that come with it. Generally, without the same familial and financial support structure, international students must find suitable alternatives for accommodation and transport in a short period of time. This situation has subjected them to multiple cases of abuse and created situations whereby they are taken advantage of. Students must find suitable housing for the duration of their studies within a close radius to campus, within limited financial means, and hope for sufficient security because of crimes and xenophobic attacks. Students are also subjected to discriminative rental practices by some property agencies (Sehoole, 2015); they are not easily accepted by their fellow students or even the society at large (Smith & Khawaja, 2011:700). They must become accustomed to a new environment and a new culture, a situation that could make them homesick, create stress, anxiety and isolation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011:700). The past few years have been challenging in the academic aspect, with several instances of student' unrest throughout the country, which led to the movement #FeesMustFall. It created fear among international students and academics alike across the country, with waves of protests that had not been seen in the country since the mid-1980s (Cherry, 2017). However, those disruptions had far more dramatic consequences for international students regarding their legal status and the academic year.

1.6.6   Challenges of South Africa as a choice for Gabonese students

School fees, although affordable compared to Europe, are still high, as students from a non-SADC country must pay higher fees (Tati, 2010:291). Gabonese students need to apply for a study visa, and by doing so, they must show proof of sufficient funds, which implies the payment of tuition fees and a return ticket (Tati, 2010:291). These requirements are sometimes difficult to meet owing to the amount of money requested not being sufficient. Learning of a new language is also a challenge for Gabonese students because they are French-speaking students and have had minimal exposure to English prior to their arrival in South Africa, which makes it problematic to successfully complete their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) requirements (Tati, 2010:283).

Along with the above-mentioned challenges comes the safety issue as the country has a long history of violence since the Apartheid era. Shindondola (2003:18) stated that since the establishment of a democratic multiracial South Africa, the country has welcomed an increasing number of migrants from African countries as well as seeing an increasing number of attacks on them and other xenophobic acts. South Africa counted 601 366 contact crimes with 20 336 murders between April 2017 and March 2018 (Writer, 2018; AfricaCheck, 2018). This trend also occurs at schools within the different campuses around the country, with reported cases of violence and even rape. In addition, Gabonese students being away from their homes and families and in a country with a new language, usually find themselves in great social distress, which causes them to be homesick and lonely (Andrade, 2006:136).

1.6.7   Benefit of international students: General concept

One of the major benefits of international student mobility is the economic factor. For example, in the UK, it was established that overall the country had gathered £22.6 billion during the 2015/2016 academic year, only for first-year students (Gavan, Maike & Jenna, 2018:32). Therefore, more international students means more money to spend on school fees, living expenses, and accommodation, as well as providing revenue to the economy by contributing to the production of knowledge and technology (Levent, 2016: 3853).

The benefit for the host nation, could also include social factors such as the perception that international students will have of the country as well as its culture and people. This, in turn, could create relations on a political or cultural level with possible future economic ties (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013:13).

1.6.8 Benefit of international students: South African perspective

From the perspective of some students remaining in the country after graduation, South Africa has a potential human capital to use if ever a need is felt in any sector. Therefore, within this human capital, government, private and public organizations should compete to recruit the ones with the "best human capital youth, host-country language ability, full credential recognition, significant acculturation, and domestically relevant professional training" (Hawthorne, 2014:1). The country would also benefit from a regional, continental and even international exposure, as the alumni would be the best "ambassadors" for prospective students. The international alumni can influence other students to go through a comparable experience as they advocate the positive sides of the culture, education system, business opportunity and values of the host country (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013:15).

International students benefit South Africa as some partnerships are created with foreign universities to encourage their staff members to work according to international standards for teaching and research purposes (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013:15).

1.7 Methodology

In this section, the researcher provides an overview of the methodology used during this study.

1.7.1 Research method

Qualitative method is often used to provide findings for study "about meaning, experience and perspective". This method relies on the participants' opinions based on their own words related to their knowledge and observation. It is often not designed for measurable or calculable variables (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016:499; Brynard & Hanekom, 2006:37). The qualitative method was chosen as the best option since the study intends to explore the factors influencing international students from Gabon to further their tertiary education in South Africa; during the study Gabonese students' standpoint was indispensable. Furthermore, qualitative researches include different techniques such as a semi-structured interview which enabled the study to attempt to understand the different views of participants about a topic for "background information or institutional perspective" (Hammarberg et al., 2016: 499).

1.7.2 Research design

In qualitative research, there are different types of designs, namely: explanatory, descriptive and exploratory research design. Qualitative explanatory research design allows the study to produce empirical literature to explain the reasons behind a specific social phenomenon occurrence by attempting to identify "causal factors" and consequences of the targeted phenomenon (Cargan, 2007:7; McNabb, 2014:28; Bhattacherjee, 2012:6). Descriptive research design focuses on cautious observations and thorough documentation of a specific phenomenon. The observations should be constructed on replicable scientific technique and thus are more consistent than "casual observations" (Bhattacherjee, 2012:5), while qualitative exploratory research design is usually undertaken in a new field where the aim of the research is to "scope out the magnitude"; to generate some basic views; to assess the usefulness for further studies regarding a specific matter, event or fact (Bhattacherjee, 2012:5). Since the study was about the factors influencing Gabonese students, this study used qualitative explanatory research design.

According to Yin (2009:14), the case study approach is viewed as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context". Furthermore, Zainal (2007:1) affirmed that a case study is a detailed investigation, which collects data over a precise time-frame, about a phenomenon, usually involving "a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of the study". Considering those

statements, the study focused only on students from Gabon within the city of Cape Town who study at a tertiary level; the case study approach was chosen for this study.

1.7.3 Delimitation of the study

The study was conducted within the City of Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa.

1.7.4 Data collection instrument

Since this qualitative study used a case study approach, it means that the study relied on the participants' opinions. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:3) affirmed that "the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world before scientific explanations". According to Welman et al., (2006:165) in research there are mainly three kinds of interviews: structured, unstructured and semi-structured interview.

A structured interview is based strictly on a discussion guide from which the researcher should not become derailed. The wording and the order of the question should also remain the same for all interviewees regardless of their background (Welman et al., 2006:165). An unstructured interview is usually "informal and is meant to explore a general area of interest in-depth". It is regarded as an "informant interview" as the researcher is most likely to guide the interview and probably affect it since he has the freedom to direct the interview with the interviewee responding to the questions (Welman et al., 2006:166). In a semi-structured interview, an interview guide is established which gathers a list of topics building numerous questions about the topics. Some additional questions may be asked in order to better understand a respondent's point; despite all the questions being the same the formulation may change in order to "fit the background and educational level" of the interviewee (Welman et al., 2006:166).

According to the above explanation, the data collection method found suitable for the study was semi-structured. Although a preconceived list of questions about specific themes was drafted, this method gave the freedom to the interviewee and researcher to move slightly away from the questions when an explanation was needed to substantiate the answer or vice versa (Welman et al., 2006:166).

1.7.5 Data collection method

The data were collected using face-to-face interviews. It allowed the interviewer to have control over evasive or unclear answers by allowing the interviewer to intervene and ask for clarifications (Welman et al., 2006:164).

1.7.6 Sampling method

Sampling is the selecting process that takes a representative part of the population under study for the aim of drawing conclusions, themes or patterns of behaviours (Bhattacherjee, 2012:65).

Within sampling, differentiation should be made between probability sampling and non-probability sampling. In probability sampling, it is possible to rule that any subjects or objects of the population under study will be incorporated in the sample (Welman et al., 2006:56). In non-probability sampling, some members of the population might not have the opportunity to take part of the study, as the probability to include each of them cannot be established (Welman et al., 2006:67). The sampling method chosen for this study was non-probability sampling (purposive sampling method: snowball).

1.8. Ethical consideration

Welman et al. (2006:201) affirmed that ethical consideration is to guarantee that no controversy or damage to the image of the participants or the entity subject to the research arises from the contents of the research and its outcomes. During the study, it was ensured that the authors were credited for all citations used.

In face-to-face interviews, challenges such as the physical harm, participant consent, environment and the timing (Elmir et al., 2011:49; Allmark et al., 2009:14) could arise. To avoid this, the participants had the right to remain anonymous, and their privacy, confidentiality and liberty to withdraw were respected. Furthermore, it was ensured that all participants had comprehensive information about the aim of the study. Consent was sought from each of them using a consent form (*Appendix B*). A consent letter (*Appendix E*) from the President of the Gabonese students' society in Cape Town was received before the beginning of the research.

1.9 Chapter outline

Chapter One consists of the introduction which enabled the researcher to provide an understanding of the study. The problem, objectives, significance, limitations and key concepts of the study were explained; moreover, the research's main question and sub-questions preliminary literature review and research design were explained as well.

Chapter Two is the literature review; it focused on the factors already studied by other researchers regarding international student mobility. Those factors lay the ground of the academic understanding of the topic. It also tackles the advantages, challenges as well as the benefits that international students' mobility could have.

Chapter Three deals with the research methodology undertaken in this study. This chapter includes the population under study, sampling method, sampling frame and the size of the population and research design.

Chapter Four covers the presentation of data; it screens all the information collected throughout the study and compares it with the body of literature. It retains only those pertinent enough to create a pattern that would enable the study to provide meaningful findings.

Chapter Five concludes the research as well as making recommendations. This chapter also provides of suggestions for future research.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter provided the research background, the problem statement, the research questions and objective as well as reference to the literature review, an overview of the methodology used, the ethical consideration and the chapters' outline. The next chapter will discuss literature about international student mobility, with significance to the research questions.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The migration of African students is no longer a new phenomenon, as the recruitment of those students has turned into a sustainable strategy linked to the development of higher institutions of education (Kusumawati, 2013:314; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:106). However, literature regarding this important part of the global demand on student' mobility is lacking (Joseph & Joseph, 2000:41).

The purpose of this chapter is to review the current literature about student mobility in tertiary education, with particular attention to the Gabonese students' context. The globalization of modern society has impacted the governance of the higher education system, the result of which was its internationalisation (Kusumawati, 2013: 314). However, knight (2015:8) stated that higher education at an international level encompasses important benefits as well as risks. Therefore, this chapter is as follow: Motivations for studying abroad; Advantages of South Africa; Challenges of South Africa; Benefit of international students.

2.2 Motivations for studying abroad: South African destination

In recent years, South Africa has established itself as a solid student destination for international students, particularly for those coming from the African continent (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:827). This situation is not the result of a sudden change, but the combination of certain factors encouraging African students to choose South Africa as their study destination, thus establishing the country as a continental hub for tertiary education (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:828). Within theories of migration, one study by Lee (1966) was beneficial as it determines the motivations for studying abroad prescribed as 'push and pull' factors.

With regard to the motivation for studying abroad and South Africa being the country of study, the 'pull factors' theory accounts for the outflow of students. This is because 'pull factors' are those that encourage students to choose a specific country over another as their host nation for academic purposes (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002:82).

2.2.1 Development factor

Within the African continent, South Africa is among the most developed nations and is constantly improving its socio-economic environment, which enables fair access to tertiary education. This in turn improves and strengthens the quality as well as the admission capacity of the country (The World Bank, 2019b).
South Africa has several good scientific research institutions and the collaboration between universities and the business sector in innovation is effective and ranked 31st worldwide

(Schwab et al., 2014: 39). This, therefore, influences the choice of the students, as it creates the hope of experiencing good standards of education on African soil. With all available educational infrastructures and resources such as laboratories, e-learning facilities, new study infrastructures and technologically advanced facilities (Tati, 2010:281), students will find themselves in a country where basic needs for satisfactory student life will not lack.

If South Africa has established itself as a regional and continental hub for higher education, it is due to its relative strengths compared to other countries in the African continent and global surrounds. "South Africa is a middle-income, emerging market which enjoys an economy maintained with higher strata of development in relation to the rest of the region, a fact with particular implications in terms of international migration" (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:831). South Africa enjoys a well-organized market for goods and services, it fares well in business sophistication and innovation (Schwab et al., 2014: 39). Furthermore, South Africa is the second most economically productive country in Sub-Saharan Africa, after Mauritius (Lee & Sehoole, 2015: 831).

2.2.2 Socio-cultural factor

South Africa being in Africa, African students are not totally lost when arriving in the country, hence they still find themselves in a society that is not so different from theirs. This factor could eventually help them to fit in and decrease the level of homesickness (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:185). The socio-cultural factor encompasses little things such as music or diet with the availability of food (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:185) originating from their home country mostly supplied by foreign-owned stores. Students can gain access to clubs, restaurants and churches which accommodate foreign and allow them to enjoy living in the country. Moreover, they can find a foreign community in the country and universities in which they study. Although individuals in these communities may not necessarily come from the same country, sharing the experience of being a foreign national (Mda, 2010:10) helps them to settle down though away from their families and homes. Some studies show that the choice of international students regarding the host nation could be driven by the cultural difference in the aim of acquiring life experience (Clavel, 2015). Socio-cultural similarity is among those factors that could attract students towards certain destinations as it helps them feel at ease while studying in a country where they understand social and cultural practices (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:185; Nghia, 2015:4).

2.2.3 Growth factor

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that over the past thirty years, the number of international students grew from 0.8 million to 4.6 million in 2015 (OECD, 2017:287). This phenomenon has not spared Africa, and South Africa in

particular. Kritz citing the World Bank (2013:29) stated that African's tertiary education enrolments have increased at a rate of 9% while in the rest of the world the growth was 5%.

Thus, South Africa being one of the leading countries within the continent, the country has seen the reflection of this growth within its own educational landscape. Over the past two decades the number of foreign students in South African universities has "grown dramatically" (MacGregor, 2014). For instance, there were 73 859 foreign students enrolled in the public higher education institutions in 2016 compared to the 2002 figure of 46 687 foreign students (South Africa, 2018:11) with a total of 127 529 foreign students in 2016 enrolled in South African institutions of higher education (South Africa, 2018:30). This increase in the number of international students enrolling in South Africa is mostly due to "the region's rapid population growth and its rising levels of secondary education completion" (Kritz, 2013:29).

2.3 Motivations for studying abroad: Gabonese students' motivation

In the year 2017, Gabon had a total number of 7129 international students (UNESCO, 2018b). Deciding to study in a different country and to experience a new culture and education system is not an easy choice and is one of the most critical choices in life, especially for students who are still in the early stages of their adult life (Dziwornu, Yakar and Temurcin, 2016:227). Whether from Gabon or elsewhere, students consider several matters before making their choice. According to Kritz (2013:32), though the context in which students from Africa take this decision may differ, it is realistic to claim that 'push forces' remain at work in students' country of origin that influence them to study abroad.

2.3.1 Historical (colonial) factor

Having been colonised by France, Gabon has been part of a vast territory formerly known as French Equatorial African (AEF). As in the other countries within this region, Gabonese's administration and educational system are largely based on the French model. According to Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2015:106), ever since the European higher education system was implemented in the different African colonies ruled by France, the mobility of students from Africa towards French universities became common. At the time, most of the colonised countries "lacked the skilled labour needed to fill jobs in government, universities and other sectors". Therefore, colonial authorities, with the aim of building an elite class that would administrate the countries on their behalf after their independences, then decided that it was cost-effective to send African students to their universities in Europe instead of developing the higher education systems in Africa (Kritz, 2013:32; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:106).

The motivation for studying abroad in the Gabonese context is, therefore, something that has a link to its history. Between 2010 and 2016, the majority (64.8%) of Gabonese students went to Europe (Campus France, 2017:26), with France being the number one destination, as it was for the past two decades (Chien & Kot, 2011:9). It can thus be argued that the preference for Gabonese students to seek the European education system for higher education is partially due to the education policy of France throughout the colonial era. This trend has then continued and has been favoured well after independence (Chien & Kot, 2011:9). The figure below illustrates the destination of African students according to the language spoken in the country of origin.

Figure 2.1: Linguistic zones of destination according to the language of the African country of origin
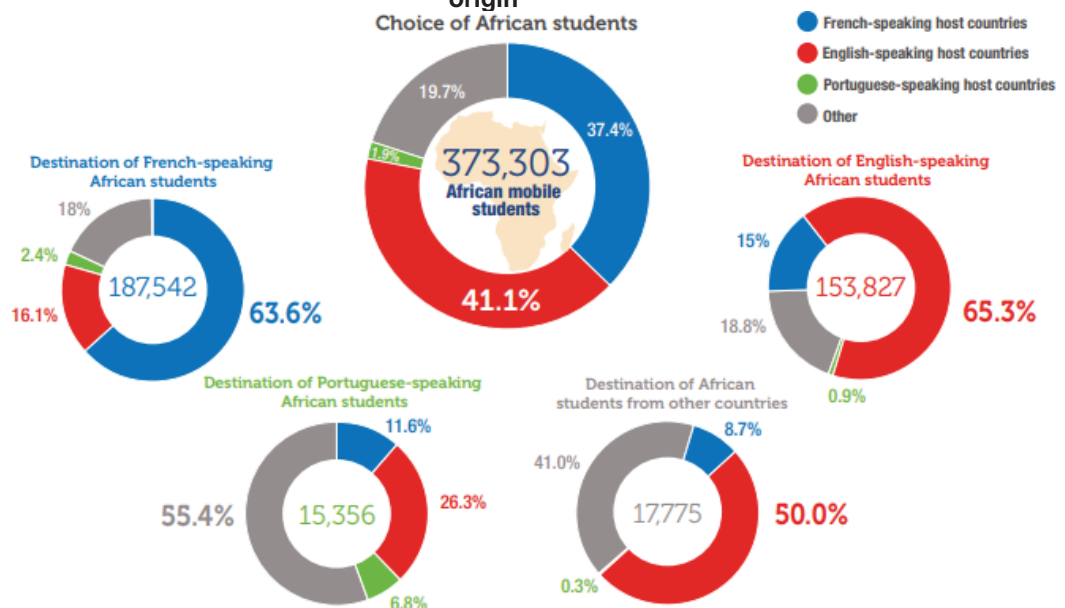
Source: Campus France (2017:4).

2.3.2 Political factor

The political link between the host nation and the country of origin of international students has been established as a factor that could influence the decision of students (Nghia, 2015:4). Nghia (2015:4) stated that the political factor is still today a significant reason for international students. Specially with regard to government employees or civil workers who generally study abroad via scholarship programmes or bilateral accords between the two countries involved. Kritz (2013:34) affirmed that in the case of the UK and France, having close international proximity with their former African colonies allows them to offer scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate studies to students from former colonies. The notion behind this was that studying abroad would help African nations to "build the

scientific, engineering and management expertise needed to allow them to compete effectively in the international economy" (Kritz, 2013:32).

As an example, in the same perspective, the Turkish government has established a close relationship with Africa as its key for foreign policy. This is done through political partnerships based on bilateral trade agreements and development assistance in the form of scholarships to African students. From this political partnership, 4380 scholarships were awarded between 1995 and 2014 which subsequently grew the number of African students in Turkish universities, even in categories where those students paid fees (Dziwornu et al., 2016:231).

2.3.3 Educational factor

The Gabonese's educational system has experienced numerous strikes by both students and lecturers. As reported by *Jeune Afrique* (2018), Gabon's education system has to deal with issues such as unfinished school programmes, overcrowded classes, lecturers accumulating salary arrears, to name a few. The educational sector in Gabon is challenged by limited financial means allocated by the state. The total resources allocated to education represented 13.4% of the national budget, which remains below the African average of around 19% (Mouyissi, 2015). No Gabonese university has its own Wi-Fi network, the biggest university in the country still has issues over the harmonization of its educational system, it does not have proper toilets for students and almost no recently published books in the students' library (Info241, 2014). Although strikes are for valid demands from students and lecturers, troubles at tertiary level in Gabon too often reach a point where strikes turn into radical confrontations between strikers and the police (Info241, 2014).

Furthermore, it is alleged that all promotions of students in Gabon have gone through a strike accompanied by violent clashes with police (Info241, 2014). This is symptomatic of the country's chaotic educational state, which in the year 2016-2017 reached its climax, whereby following a long strike by students and lecturers protesting for their study conditions and demanding salary increases, the country almost had its entire academic year cancelled (*Jeune Afrique*, 2018). The educational system in Gabon is such an issue for students' families, students and authorities alike, that the president of the country himself declared that "our educational system is down, we must revolutionize it as the future of our children is at stake" (*Jeune Afrique*, 2018).

2.3.4 Quality factor

Although Gabon's education system has an enrolment rate of 96.4%, it also boasts a high repetition rate and low capital in development (World Bank, 2018). According to Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2015:105), this is due to the fragile socio-economic state and poor educational infrastructure which make the higher education system less competitive and

attractive compared to foreign institutions. Therefore, in the event of students being able to complete a qualification, most employers and the society at large give more value to international qualifications compared to those that are issued at home (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:184). Most graduates consider that having studied abroad and gained a foreign qualification makes their future employment prospects easier as there is a high status associated with it (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:184; Mpinganjira & Rugimbana, 2009:2).

Thus, due to the perception that higher education and qualification are of better quality if acquired abroad, students who have access to funding or from families that can bear the tuition fees and cost of living would rather migrate elsewhere for tertiary studies (Kritz, 2013:32). Some African higher education institutions, as well as those in Gabon, have a marginalized position in the production of knowledge and dissemination processes (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:105). This situation has accentuated the perception of low quality of the domestic level of higher education. programmes learnt and skills taught at tertiary level mostly focus on a "traditional teacher-centred learning" which emphasizes non-interactive learning, tests and rote learning instead of "building a student's independence, analytical skills, debating skills and questioning" (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:184). Bearing in mind that nowadays, students are regarded as customers who see higher education institutions as providers of products (qualifications) and on the other side, higher education institutions see students as buyers (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:105), the choice is rapidly made. Students therefore prefer studying abroad in institutions offering a proactive learning approach in order to increase their knowledge (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:184).

2.4 Advantages of South Africa as a choice for international students

According to Mpinganjira and Rugimbana (2009:2), compared to other African countries South Africa seems to have managed student' outflow differently and is presently the foremost exporter of higher educational services in Africa. South African's tertiary education system plays a pivotal role in retaining young African students within the continent (MacGregor, 2014). Thus, in the light of the advantages South Africa offers to students, which in return influence their choice towards the country.

2.4.1 Reputational factor

With modern and technologically advanced facilities in the country, South African qualifications and institutions have gradually acquired good critiques from international students and academics alike as they are respected internationally (Mpinganjira, 2011:268).

International students do not necessarily need to travel to western countries to study in well-rated universities as three South African universities are among the continental top five universities (The World University Rankings, 2019). Those universities are the University of

Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand and Stellenbosch University. The University of Cape Town ranks at number 136 worldwide ahead of well-known universities such as the University of Liverpool (165th), the University of Ottawa (141th) or Sydney University of Technology (194th) (The World University Rankings, 2019). The table below shows the top five African universities.

Table 2.1: Top five African universities in the world

Rank	Name	N° of FTE students	N° of students per staff	International students	Female/Male Ratio
136	University of Cape Town	21,812	11.9	17%	53: 47
194	University of the Witwatersrand	28,521	26.3	8%	56: 44
251-300	Stellenbosch University	24,308	26.1	8%	55: 45
401-500	Aswan University	22,393	40.8	0%	59: 41
401-500	Covenant University	35,451	28.4	5%	58: 42

Source: The World University Rankings (2019).

Along with the good ranking of its universities, South Africa has also built a solid reputation in terms of production of academic work. The good academic input of South African universities explains the 35th position (first African nation) held by the country in the Scimago Journal & Country Rank that counts the number of academic publications and citations between the years 1996 and 2017 worldwide (Srj, 2018). South Africa enjoys a wide network of journals, which ensures the scrutiny, discussion, and presentation of research work. Such a platform increases South Africa's academic visibility in terms of academic reputation, judging by the 90 journals listed by Scimago Journal & Country Rank (Srj, 2018).

Beine et al. (2014:45) cited a study by Van Bouwel (2009) which claimed that publications and citations in world publication, as well as the number of national universities within diverse educational ranking papers, are qualitative indicators that have an impact on the size and direction of international students' flow. Furthermore, South African higher education has seen its universities gaining a good reputation as its reorganization was principally driven by practices in developed nations with the aim to place the country as an alternative to African international students' outflow to studying overseas (Mpinganjira & Rugimbana, 2009:2).

2.4.2 Infrastructural factor

Students that would like to enrol for tertiary education in South Africa have the choice between traditional, comprehensive and technological universities as well as numerous colleges both private and public. According to the statistic on post-school education and training commissioned by the DHET, South Africa counts a large number of higher education institutions with 26 universities and 123 PHEIs (South Africa, 2018:9).

It is reported that in some cases, international students have limited study choices, with sometimes the course of interest not even offered in the country of origin. This situation leaves little option other than to go abroad if they wish to pursue studies in specialized fields (Kritz, 2013:34; Mpinganjira & Rugimbana, 2009:2). Therefore, having multiple higher education institutions offering a wide range of courses allows prospective students' a different perspective in terms of the courses into which they would like to enrol. Moreover, according to Tati (2010:287), South Africa is a sustainable destination country for educational opportunities due to its modern infrastructures in place, to a point where the country is now seen as an alternative to traditional destinations such as France, Belgium, the UK or some other northern African countries. Therefore, such factor is an alternative to migration to other countries and represents a competitive advantage for South Africa.

2.4.3 Policy factor

Since the advent of a democratic South Africa in 1994, the higher education sector has been transformed to get rid of its apartheid past (Mpinganjira & Rugimbana, 2009:2). It is with this intention that upon the re-entry of the country into the international community, South Africa has endorsed various official national and international documents and statements that have set the basis for an approach to the internationalisation of higher education (South Africa, 2017:12).

2.4.3.1 SADC Protocol on Education and Training (1997)

The SADC Protocol on Education and Training (1997) makes provision for enabling the mobility of students within the region for study purposes. This protocol stipulates that higher education institutions in South Africa should: count a minimum of 5% as part of students heading from SADC countries other than their own; must treat SADC countries' students as local students when it comes to tuition fees and accommodation; work towards harmonization, equivalence, and standardization of higher education institutions' entry requirements with due acknowledgement to prerequisites to ensure feasibility and equitable implementation are met; develop a credit transfer system to simplify credit recognition between higher education institutions in the region; harmonize the academic year of higher

education institutions in order to ease staff and student mobility; and finally work toward the reduction and potential elimination of immigration barriers that obstruct mobility of staff and students (South Africa, 2017:12).

2.4.3.2 Addis Convention (2014)

The Addis Convention (2014) is about the recognition of studies, certificates, diplomas, degrees and other academic qualifications in higher education in African states. Its aim is to strengthen and promote inter-regional and international co-operation in the recognition of qualifications; define and put in place an operational quality assurance and accreditation system at a national, regional and continental level; Facilitate the exchange and mobility of students, teachers and researchers of the continent and the diaspora, by recognizing qualifications delivered by different countries in order to pursue higher education; further the establishment of high-level joint training and research programmes among higher education institutions of the continent and abroad. This Convention encompasses all qualifications achieved in public or PHEIs by the authorities of a party, situated in or outside its national boundaries and in compliance with the legislation in force (UNESCO, 2014c).

2.4.3.3 African Union's Agenda 2063 (2014)

The African Union's Agenda 2063 is a strategic outline for the socio-economic rebuilding of Africa over the next 50 years, to which South Africa is a signatory country. It has the ambition to fast-forward the implementation of continental initiatives for sustainable development and growth. Among other areas, it focuses on education by promoting science, technology, research and innovation in building knowledge, human capital and skills; strengthening technical and vocational education and training (TVET) through creation of quality centres in Africa; harmonizing standards of education in promoting reciprocal recognition of academic and professional qualifications; utilizing universities and their networks to enable high-quality university education and expanding student and academic mobility across the African continent and establishing an African accreditation agency which will monitor and develop quality standards of education with the aim of increasing student and academic mobility within the continent (African Union Commission, 2015:15).

2.4.3.4 Agreement on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (1997)

This agreement establishes collaboration between the EU and South Africa in the fields of science, technology, research and development by promoting scientific and technological progress in both parties and particularly to promote social and economic development in South Africa. This collaboration takes place through mutual participation of companies, universities and research centres by sharing the use of research facilities; sharing of

information as well as scientific networks; exchanging and training of researchers, engineers and students (Eur-lex, 2018).

2.4.3.5 National Development Plan (2012)

The national development plan sets various targets and objectives for higher education with relevance to international student mobility such as standards for international exchange partnerships should be established and encouraged; to increase of support for postgraduate studies and partnerships between universities and industry; the redefinition of the funding model for all educational institutions that conduct research; to establish South Africa as a hub for higher education and training in the region, with the aim of attracting an important number of international student population; and finally to increase the number of Master's and PhD students, by funding partnerships for research with the aim of having a 25% level of postgraduates in South African universities by 2030 (South Africa, 2017:16).

2.4.3.6 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013)

The White Paper for post-school education and training recommends: that international scholarships and bursaries should be made available to the DHET; that research quality and capacity should be enhanced; focus should be put on qualifications in scarce skills areas, by improving the qualifications of academics; that as stated by the SADC Protocol, South African and international students from those countries should undertake studies in South Africa and other SADC countries; that research partnerships that involve African countries and other developing countries, including nations from BRICS accords, should be increased but with no prejudice to the relationships with developed countries; that an appropriate policy framework for international cooperation in post-school education and training should be established (South Africa, 2017:17).

2.4.4 Stability factor

The host nation's political and social stability is a factor that needs to be closely assessed by prospective students before making their decision. Kritz (2013:32) noted that political and social strife usually interferes with the completion of tertiary-training programmes and acknowledged that the conditions within the host country could complicate international students' choices.

The above statement concurs with the thoughts of Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2015:112) asserting that African students usually "feel more secure and safe when they travel to Europe and America than to neighbouring countries". They also stated that African students' mobility is linked to the various socio-economic and political realities of the host country. Security, peace and economic growth highly motivate students while making their

choice' the below (non-exhaustive) list of countries are among those that experience an outflow and/or disruption in higher education due to various factors over the past two decades:

- Zimbabwe with the social and political unrest;
- Cameroon with the on-going conflict between the Anglophone and Francophone sides of the country;
- Nigeria has terrorism issues and safety threats represented by Boko Haram;
- Tunisia with the social revolution of 2011 that led to the exile of former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January of the same year;
- Kenya with the mass murder orchestrated by the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, that took place at the University of Garissa in April 2015 with 148 victims and 79 people injured;
- Gabon with social unrest as well as continuous strikes at tertiary level;
- Angola with the civil war that lasted until 2002;
- the Democratic Republic of Congo with the on-going safety issues in various parts of the country, turning into a humanitarian crisis forcing people to flee the country and seek asylum in neighbouring countries.

While political and social protests may be happening in other African countries, since the end of the Apartheid era, South Africa has enjoyed considerable stability. Although South Africa has had numerous problems that plague its higher education system, the difference here is that those issues tend to be specific to accommodation, fees or racism. In other words, these issues are related to campus and have not caused disruptions that forced universities to stop the completion of study programmes (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:830).

2.5 Advantages of South Africa as a choice for Gabonese students

2.5.1 Immigration regulations factor

According to Tati (2010:283), the changes initiated by the Republic of South Africa regarding the simplification of students' procedures and requirements have moved from restrictive to flexible ones, the number of students in South Africa is believed to be increasing. Therefore, the above statement substantiates those of Nyarko and Ephraim (2016:185) who affirmed that the destinations of international students are influenced by immigration procedures and requirements.

Few but essential changes were implemented by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to improve the attractiveness of the country and simplify the administrative issues faced by international students when obtaining their visas or changing their status. Since 2014, all study visa applications within the Republic of South Africa must be submitted at a Visa

Facilitation Service (VFS) centre near the educational institution where the course will be undertaken (Politicsweb, 2019). This measure subsequently reduced the waiting period for the issuance of student visas which decreased from a minimum of six to eight weeks (Spooner, 2015) to a maximum of three to four weeks. To alleviate students' financial burden of tuition fees and cost of living, the DHA has made provision for foreign students who wish to earn money while studying. They are now allowed to conduct remunerated part-time activities for a period not exceeding 20 hours per week (Politicsweb, 2019).

Knowing that South Africa is facing issues regarding a shortage of skills which is essential for the economy (Tati 2010:283), the DHA has established a list of critical skills which compiles the professions in high demand within the country. To retain students who meet the criteria mentioned in the critical skills list, the DHA has allowed students graduating from South African institutions of higher learning to apply for permanent residence upon graduation. Furthermore, it made provision for those who do not wish to stay permanently within the country with the possibility to apply for a critical skills visa (Intergate-immigration, 2019).

2.5.2 Linguistic factor

English enables Gabonese students to have an additional language and allow them to broaden their spectrum in pursuit of employment, as English is business language. A study by Sehoole (2006:4) shows that the use of English as a medium of instruction and communication is one of the factors of international students' mobility, as it allows those who are not English speakers to learn a second language.

Chien and Kot (2011:16) affirmed that the number of students coming from Francophone African countries studying in Anglophone countries is also increasing. South Africa is becoming one of the destinations for many African students, including those from Francophone countries. The globalization of English as the international language for higher education, research, and business has placed the focus on the global knowledge economy and cutting-edge academic networks on English-speaking countries (Deardorff et al., 2012:8). Learning the language of the host nation is a prerequisite for their study and social life (Nghia, 2015:4), so it can be concluded that the increasing number of Francophone students still choosing to study in South Africa has taken the language factor in consideration. Consequently, the language of instruction at university is a factor affecting the students' decision in selecting a programme and study destination (Phang, 2013:33).

2.5.3 Geographical factor

With a good quality of education and relatively affordable tuitions fees, the geographical factor has an effect on the decision making-process of Gabonese students. Mda (2010:1) noted that over the past decade, the number of students from Africa studying in South

African universities has increased due, among other factors, to the geographical proximity. The geographical proximity of South Africa to Gabon compared to other overseas countries like France or the USA represents a non-negligible advantage for Gabonese students. This factor has been largely related to a lower cost of travelling between the country of origin and the chosen host nation (Nghia, 2015:4). This proximity could enable them to visit their home country more regularly than they could have done if they were studying in a country located further away.

2.5.4 Admission and enrolment factors

Gabonese students come from an educational system mostly based on the French system, and different from the South African one. This is due to the colonial past of the African continent as African countries have different higher education systems based on the specific nation that ruled them (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:111).

Due to this proliferation of systems, coordination of credential evaluation is essential for African universities when they admit international students (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:111). Although this is not implemented in an inclusive manner by all African countries, South Africa is one of the countries in the continent to make provision regarding this matter (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:111), by implementing the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). SAQA accommodates international students who had started any qualification before arriving in South Africa by providing an evaluation of their foreign qualifications and compares them with the South African qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (SAQA, 2018). Once this task is completed, students with foreign qualifications are accredited and now able to enrol for certain courses. Furthermore, the South African government has made this step compulsory as the DHET requires that international students applying for admission and registration with a South African higher education institution must prove that they have the prerequisite qualifications for admission to the specific study course (South Africa, 2017:45). South Africa, therefore, gives an advantage to Gabonese students since SAQA simplifies the evaluation of courses taken in another country and compares them to those in South Africa.

2.5.5 Economical factor

A study by Nghia (2015:4) citing Maringe (2006) claimed that matters related to tuition fees were considered as another factor influencing the choice of international students. South Africa has a competitive advantage compared to other potential host countries, as the country offers a lower-cost-education compared to western countries such as the USA, UK, Germany or France. This is a major factor for international students in their decision of the host country (Mda, 2010:1; Tati, 2010:281). Spooner (2015) stated that in the UK, the non-EU undergraduates could pay up to $56 000 per year, while the UK and EU students pay

only \$14 000; meanwhile at the University of Cape Town a full-time international student would pay around \$6800 a year. The previous example could possibly explain the fact that a drastic drop of African students, as well as other international students, was noticed since the introduction and the increase of fees in some Scandinavian countries as well as the UK for the first time in thirty years (Knight & Woldegiorgis, 2017:117; Nghia, 2015:5). In some cases, the lower cost of studies in most African countries compared to the Northern ones has prompted international students to prefer certain study destinations and avoid others (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:185), and this seems to have been at the advantage of South Africa.

2.6 Challenges of South Africa as a choice for international students

2.6.1 Accommodation issues

Issues related to accommodation are among those which are seen as the most difficult ones to be faced by international students (Sehoole, 2015). Students must find suitable alternatives for housing for the duration of their studies within a close radius to campus. However, it is believed that a cliché still exists regarding international students as they supposedly have a lot of money (Sehoole, 2015) and therefore able to afford higher rent.

Such a perception has consequently led students to be subject to discriminative rental practices by some property agencies as well as homeowners. t has been reported that some students were requested to pay an entire year of rent upfront, while a month-to-month plan was being offered to local students (Sehoole, 2015). Rental issues are a huge burden for international students, especially those coming from less developed countries as they are usually unemployed and what is required to pay exceeds the means at their disposal (Sehoole, 2015).

2.6.2 Students unrest

During the past few years, students' dissatisfaction has been growing, therefore students' demonstrations took place across many campuses in South Africa, their demands were mostly related to accommodation, fees and racism (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:830).

According to Cherry (2017), such protests had not taken place since the mid-1980s and had consequently created fear among international students and academics alike. Although legitimate, these protests are not directly beneficial to international students as there are endangering their legal status in the case of their exams not written in due time. For example, in the case of students that need to complete a diploma within a three years' visa, the extension of the academic year will not allow them to remain in the country unless a new application is made (with the financial cost that goes with it).

Moreover, student unrests give a bad image of the country at international level as they are associated with negative views such as lack of discipline during protests, racial polarization, coercion and violence. Even if these protests bring significant gains to the majority of local students, they are at the price of desperation and trauma, and real losses to some students (Cherry, 2017), among them international students.

In addition, with student protest campaigns like #FeesMustFall, international students became affected from an administrative and an academic point of view. They had to remain off campus when protests were held, with classes suspended and administrations shut down. This happened in order to prevent damages, injuries or loss of lives, as was the case at Durban University of Technology (DUT) where a student was shot dead during a student protest (African News Agency, 2019).

2.6.3 Choice of institution of higher education

Although South Africa has a large number of tertiary institutions, with 26 universities and 123 PHEIs (South Africa, 2018:9), international students are no longer able to easily choose in which higher education institution they will study. This can be affirmed as the previous legislation permitted students to change a visitor's visa to a study visa; however, this possibility has now been revoked and students must apply for a study permit from outside South Africa (Spooner, 2015). This means that "students cannot have an idea of what the university looks like or what kind of courses or even compare the different universities they could study in prior to applying" (Spooner, 2015). The only option for them is to rely on relatives' or friends' experience at a specific entity or on the information displayed on institutions' websites, which, knowing the complexity (or difference) of the South African system are not always reliable or comprehensive.

Furthermore, it is now compulsory that international students study in institutions that have registered with the accrediting agency. Although rightfully implemented in the aim of curbing the growing number of fake applications made to remain in South Africa legally, this factor makes it problematic for legitimate students trying to apply at smaller or specialised institutions (Spooner, 2015).

2.7 Challenges of South Africa as a choice for Gabonese students

2.7.1 Safety issues

A study by Lee and Sehoole (2015:836) indicated that African students prioritise safety as an essential concern regarding their study destination; however, South Africa has a long history of violence since the Apartheid era. According to Shindondola (2003:18) an increase in the number of attacks has been noticed. This is in accordance with the official statistics on crime which show that the country counted 601 366 contact crimes with 20 336 murders between

April 2017 and March 2018 (AfricaCheck, 2018; Writer, 2018). Additionally, South Africa presents the risk to have waves of xenophobic attacks occurring almost yearly in different parts of the country. Xenophobia is thought to be the result of people not getting what they deserve from government and therefore taking their frustration and anger out on foreign nationals (Shindondola, 2003:18).

Therefore, safety represents a disadvantage as Gabonese students could face issues regarding their physical well-being as this issue has not spared them. For instance, in 2017 a Gabonese student (Chris Divoko, 29 years) was shot seven times and found dead in Belhar, Cape Town (Cape Argus, 2017). Xenophobic attacks are very prejudicial as it seems that those attacks in South Africa are not necessarily about being a foreigner but being foreign and black. This creates a great dislike from locals and subject students to physical and verbal abuses (Manik & Singh, 2013:2; Shindondola, 2003:24).

2.7.1.1 Gender-based violence on campus

For the past few years, South African tertiary institutions have experienced constant problems of gender-based violence on their campuses with reported cases of rape (Shange, 2018). Countless stories in South Africa have surfaced about physical and sexual abuse against female students, especially while on campus.

As stated by Shange (2018) well-known universities like Nelson Mandela University, the University of Cape Town, Wits, Rhodes University and Tshwane University of Technology, to name a few, have seen some female students raped. In October 2017, a female student was raped on campus while another was stabbed while exiting a computer lab at Nelson Mandela University. At the University of Cape Town several cases of rape were confirmed as one individual was convicted and sentenced with nine life sentences for sexual assaults for the rape of five students on campus between 2015 and 2016. In 2016 at Rhodes University eleven men were accused of gender-based violence; at Wits numerous female students were allegedly raped on campus causing the arrest of a former student representative council member and a drama lecturer accused of similar abuse. In the early months of 2018 at Tshwane University of Technology, one female student was raped at Soshanguve campus; in this case, the perpetrator was arrested (Shange, 2018).

Although dramatic, the above-mentioned cases are not an accurate representation of the criminal offences female students are subjected to. According to Naidu (2018), the then minister of higher education, Dr Naledi Pandor, reported to Parliament that 47 students had been raped on South African campuses in 2017. Furthermore, this figure only represents sexual offences and no other offences like assault, theft and even murder. This was echoed by the chief executive of Universities South Africa (USAF), Ahmed Bawa, who said "a key

challenge is the level of gender-based violence on our campuses and the urgent need to ensure that women students feel safe, but there are also other forms of violence that are prevalent and need to be addressed" (Naidu, 2018).

2.7.2 Non-SADC requirements

The South African government had committed to enforcing a policy whereby students from a SADC country pay the same tuition and accommodation fees as South African students and are subsidized by the South African government (South Africa, 2017:12; Spooner, 2015). Hence, the fees paid by Gabonese students in South Africa, as non-SADC students, are higher than for their fellow students coming from SADC (Tati, 2010: 282).

The additional fees are not regulated by any governmental department but are charged by the higher education institution to international students (South Africa, 2017:45). Thus, the difference in fees between SADC and the non-SADC students are subjected to certain discrepancies. For instance, international students registering at the University of Cape Town could expect to be charged between 38% and 67% more than they would in another Institution of higher education in South Africa (Spooner, 2015).

2.7.3 Financial requirements

Gabonese international students are considered as African students and are subjected to different billing practices according to their origins. For instance, at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), in order to register it is requested for them to pay an international student levy of R1 800, added to an upfront payment of 50% of the expected fees; the remaining amount of the fees has to be paid by May of the academic year (Cape Peninsula University of Technology, n.d.). In addition to this levy, it is compulsory for them to "have an adequate medical cover with a registered South African medical scheme and proof thereof" (DHA, 2018). This situation puts those students in a tricky situation as the amount needed to be paid each academic year could easily exceed what they can afford.

2.7.4 Student eligibility

In order to study in South Africa, Gabonese students must necessarily obtain (or renew) a student visa. However, obtaining a visa implies that students are required to prove to VFS, consulates or embassies that they have sufficient funds. This can be established by providing bank statements with sufficient financial resources or proof of a scholarship covering accommodation, fees as well as all living expenses (Tati, 2010:282). Students are also expected to be in possession of a paid return ticket or to pay repatriation deposit fees equivalent to the value of a return ticket (DHA, 2018).

Although not impossible, these requirements are usually difficult to meet for most of the applicants; as for those who manage to pay, the affordability of the travel expenses is an issue. Hence Tati (2010:285) affirmed that students from Gabon, in particular, feel the impact due to expensive fares for a return ticket to their home country. Students eligibility requirements, added to the cost of university fees as non-SADC students as well as levy fees and medical aid altogether to be paid for the very same academic costs could easily become challenging to overcome, if not financially supported or prepared.

2.7.5 Mental and social well-being

According to Kanekar, Sharma and Atri (2010:56), when international students relocate to another country, they face a major change in culture upon relocating. This cultural change implies that their lives will go through development that could be the reason for distress that potentially disturbs their mental health. Issues such as displacement, homesickness, solitude and acculturation issues are faced by international students while living in the host country (Kanekar et al., 2010:56).

Moreover, the issue of mental well-being of international students tends to be disregarded as they are perceived as being emotionally strong and without adaptive issues. They are misconceived as overachievers academically and "free of all psychological distress" (Kanekar et al., 2010:56). It is expected that educational institutions in the host country should facilitate social adaptability in the new learning environment for the students (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016:386). However, the reality is that international students are confined, neglected and have to deal with homesickness and solitude causing high-stress levels as they have to fit into a new environment and manage new learning expectations (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016:386).

Mental and social well-being are also influenced by something as simple as the medium of communication. Pineteh and Mulu (2016:387) stressed that, in South Africa where English is the medium of learning and communication, the social acceptance of French-speaking international students into a higher education space depends on their capacity to converse with fellow students and staff. The aptitude to communicate in English is therefore important to handle and attenuate discrimination as well as to establish new social links with local students. Furthermore, in the case of French-speaking students, adaptation is imperative in order to complete their studies (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016:388). Social exclusion also occurs when local students decide to use local languages as means of communication for academic or social purpose, therefore not being able to speak creates misunderstanding between the two groups (Manik & Singh,2013:4). Pineteh and Mulu (2016:392) stated that, this dysfunctional situation is also generated by university staff members who are sometimes not willing to offer a helpful learning environment to francophone students, by providing further

explanation during classes and use local languages that consequently exclude international students.

2.8 Benefit of international students: General concept

2.8.1 Exchange of knowledge

Hosting international students can help with the implementation of an exchange of knowledge policy for the different stakeholders involved in this process (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:105). Having international students from another country or institutions requires the different parties to build collaborative research and development activities which will enable them to work together and exchange information (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:105). Furthermore, Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2017:110) stated that international students would allow the improvement of knowledge production and dissemination processes, as it helps the host higher institutions of education to entice the best students from all over the world. Kritz (2013:44) also shares the above thought in the sense that an inter-border partnership through cooperation among higher education institutions enables foreign students to study partially at the host institution and therefore enhance their knowledge and skills upon their return home. Furthermore, Kritz (2013:44) asserts that it is important to promote international students' mobility through the cross-border partnership as it helps in growing and strengthening the tertiary education capability of African countries and others alike.

2.8.2 Internationalising institutions

The presence of international students enables South African campuses to be internationalised, meaning that it exposes local students to international perspectives without leaving the country (Lee & Sehoole, 2015: 842). Having international students on a campus implies that this institution should keep itself up to date in terms of what is required at an international level of education. The presence of international students in a way ensures that basic international standards of higher education have to be met or improved (South Africa, 2017:19). Additionally, Ward (2011) stressed that the teaching and administrative personnel curriculum is broader at any university where there is a large number of international students. Furthermore, with a competent team of administrative workers and lecturers to welcome international students, the host institutions have the opportunity to increase their commitment to good practices. This could happen by remodelling the universities' structures as well as expanding the recruitment within their institutions when needed, but also to develop and create new institutional partnerships (Ward, 2011).

2.8.3 Overcome the lack of knowledge

In some countries, programmes are custom-made according to the developmental needs outlined by government, but not necessarily according to the needs of the society, especially in terms of science and technology that usually are obsolete (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:184). In this case, limited postgraduate programmes or lack thereof, might create a gap of knowledge, as there will not be enough graduates in a specific field. In such a situation, international students could be used in the process of knowledge acquisition as they would be trained in foreign institutions in order to acquire knowledge that does not exist in their home countries. Therefore, upon their return they will help their local institutions or country to expand (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:106).

Although increasing the number of international students suggests that the quality of educational systems of the host nation will be enhanced, it will also be the case for the sending nation as it consequently improves the human capital of international students, more especially those who decide to return home (Beine et al., 2014:43).

2.8.4 Financial gain

In today's competitive higher education world, in order to get more international students, higher education institutions are more inclined to utilize marketing theories and concepts that were until now reserved for more business-related fields (Phang, 2013:7). The reason behind this approach is that international student mobility is a market for higher education institutions that can be lucrative. According to Nghia (2015:2), international students are economically viable in their host countries and institutions, as they pay full tuition fees (sometimes at an increased rate). Thus, they contribute to the existence and operation of the host institution, especially in the current context when there is reduced higher education. International students through international trade in education became a major source of income, with a market generating multi-billion dollars in revenues for higher education institutions (Phang, 2013:7).

Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2015:110) stated that a study by the Australian government affirmed that the inflow of international students has generated an income of US$ 8.12 billion annually to the Australian economy. In New Zealand higher education-related services have created US$1.46 billion annually in foreign exchange, hence since 2005 higher education is the fifth biggest service export. In the UK, the profit created by international students in 2015/2016 accounted for about £10.7bn with £1.7bn, for EU students and £9.0bn for non-EU (Gavan et al., 2018:30). Therefore, there is no doubt that South Africa's education service is among the sectors in expansion that could generate more income for the country. This is mainly due to the increasing number of students that pay school fees directly set by institutions, which are higher than local students (Tati,2010:291). Therefore, if this economic

attractiveness is fully exploited by South African higher education institutions, the fee incomes could increase the breadth and depth of the economic independence of the South African educational system. This, in turn, could reach the level of major industry export and subsequently increase the quality of education available to both local and international students (Gavan et al., 2018:12; Tati,2010:292).

2.9 Benefit of international students: South African perspective

2.9.1 International exposure through alumni

Upon their return home, international students who had a good time in the host country could turn into brand ambassadors and specifically for its higher education system (Mpinganjira & Rugimbana, 2009:5). This means that in the case of a positive life experience while studying in South Africa, international students could develop an attachment to the facilities, culture, services and products of the country. This commitment to the host country combined with a soft power approach once the students have returned home, could generate a valuable marketing resource for South Africa (Mpinganjira & Rugimbana, 2009:5).

Besides, students may develop a preference for the host country for touristic and leisure purposes or for the host country's teaching system (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013:15). Furthermore, alumni could motivate other students to choose South Africa as a host nation or to seek South African network business when expanding their international partnerships (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013:15). The vast majority of alumni that have positively familiarised themselves while being in the host nation would advise prospective students to go through the same experience (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013:16). Nevertheless, Mellors-Bourne et al. (2013:16) insisted that, for those alumni to play a role of brand ambassador of the host country all over the world, their academic and personal expectations must be fulfilled and exceeded. Only then, the potential number of enthusiasts could be multiplied in the home country with time.

2.9.2 Boost of the local economy

Except for the incomes generated by education related expenses, international students' presence in a particular city or area generally boost the public sector usually benefiting the local economy (OECD, 2017:102). International students contribute to the improvement of the local economy while completing their studies as they use different services such as (but not limited to) money transfer, tourist attractions, transport, catering, accommodation, school of language, purchase of personal items (Nghia, 2015:2; Gavan et al., 2018:13).

Along with the actual students, the host country usually welcomes their families and friends who visit the country and therefore create supplementary incomes (Gavan et al., 2018:30). There is an evident economic impact associated with the non-tuition fee expenditure

associated with international students, as well as the spending of their visitors (for example friends and family) when they are in the host country to visit these students during their studies (Gavan et al., 2018:12). Furthermore, it has been established that the amount of revenue received for non-tuition fee expenditure by international students is often found to be "comparable to direct tuition fee income", making this type of expenditure a significant element of the local economy (Gavan et al., 2018:12). In the UK, for example, non-tuition related expenditures of international students contributed to a large amount of the local economy with a total of £8.09bn for the academic year 2015-2016. This figure was higher than the non-related tuition expenditures of local students (including EU students) that stood at a total of £3.24bn for the same year (Gavan et al., 2018:30). The table below shows the financial impact of non-fee expenditures during the 2015/2016 academic year in the UK.

Table 2.2: Impact of non-fee expenditures per student, level of study and domicile for 2015/2016 academic year

Level of study	Impact of non-fee expenditures per student, £			Total impact of non-fee expenditures, £bn.		
	EU	Non-EU	Average	EU	Non-EU	Total
Other undergraduate	£60,000	£54,000	£55,000	£0.21bn	£0.65bn	£0.86bn
Undergraduate degree	£61,000	£65,000	£64,000	£1.75bn	£3.68bn	£5.43bn
Other postgraduate	£69,000	£65,000	£67,000	£0.20bn	£0.28bn	£0.48bn
Higher degree (taught)	£35,000	£30,000	£31,000	£0.68bn	£2.67bn	£3.36bn
Higher degree (research)	£84,000	£79,000	£81,000	£0.39bn	£0.80bn	£1.20bn
Average	**£55,000**	**£47,000**	**£49,000**			
				£3.24bn	**£8.09bn**	**£11.33bn**

Source: Gavan et al. (2018:30).

International students are purchasers and consumers of local products and services. Although the impact of a single graduate's personal consumer behaviour may be small but multiplied by hundreds of thousands could be significant collectively (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013:24).

2.9.3 Available labour force

Upon the completion of their studies, International students could be a labour force in fields where skills are scarce. Beine et al. (2014:41) stated that the international student mobility is linked to skilled and highly skilled workers. The migration of skilled workers has been part of the worldwide process of globalization, as it reflects the growing importance for countries to attract talents and skills needed to improve their growth process compared to other forms of

migration such as forced migration, low-skilled workers, family reintegration (Beine et al., 2014:41). Graduate international students are, therefore, more likely to remain and work in the host country as they potentially are a valuable source of skilled labour force for the host country (Beine et al., 2014:41). Those international students represent an educated labour force which does not need any further preparation and integration since they became familiar with the culture of the country while completing their studies (Beine et al., 2014:41). To meet the demand in the labour market and achieve socio-economic targets set by governments' host countries, higher education has been transformed to be able to produce a higher level of international students with adequate skills and competence levels (Nghia, 2015:2). In the perspective of South Africa being able to retain those international students, their skills could be required in order to advance and sustain the development of the South African economy (Nghia, 2015:2).

2.9.4 Soft power

Nye (2012) defined 'soft power' as the capacity to change people's choice by creating an interest which usually leads to the acceptance of the proposed concept, choice or knowledge. Watanabe (2018:345) stated that attraction plays a decisive role in the same mechanisms through which knowledge spreads. The powerful dimension in the transmission of knowledge remains comparatively rare and is kept mainly for cases of focused, aggressive propaganda combined with censorship of views that do not adhere to the leading ideology. Yet, when concepts and ideas are spread by their own attractions rather than aggressive propaganda, they have the ability to persuade other people of their merits. Nye (2012) stated that the main aspect of soft power for a country is that it makes use of non-coercive means which are divided into three main aspects: the cultural aspect, which portrays the host country as attractive to foreigners; the political aspect, which demonstrates the rightfulness of its system that could be copied to other countries; and foreign policies, which implies that a country has the legitimacy to pretend to a moral authority.

Therefore, according to Lomer (2017:582), the UK's status for high-quality of its higher education could be perceived as a residual effect of its soft power. In the soft power basis, attracting significant quantities of international students is said to surge the UK's influence in global diplomacy as the international alumni of British education are considered to be more educated and appreciative of "British values" (Lomer,2017:583). It could, be stated that through international students, informal political relationships can be established, and sympathy developed with people of various countries, making the host country more attractive, through dispersed actions across institutions and sectors (Lomer,2017:583).

In modern times, the vehicle for the advancement of national interests abroad has been education, both in the cases of colonization and soft influence on local elites and sometimes

even on the population at large. Watanabe (2018:345), emphasises that "the soft power of higher education is exercised through influence on the intellectual and scientific life and through spreading ideas worldwide", therefore attracting international students and academics to higher education institutions is said to be an effective approach to nurturing individuals who will gain an understanding of a given country.

Thus, by increasing the number of international students in South Africa gives a platform to the country to put in practice its soft power. This will in turn portray a good vision of the country and therefore create the need for other students to come study in the country.

2.9.5 Academic competitiveness

In today's educational world, the internationalization of higher education became inevitable over the years due to the competition for international students among the main hosting nations (Mpinganjira & Rugimbana, 2009:2; Mpinganjira, 2012:261). The larger the number of international students, the greater the academic credibility the hosting country will derive to its benefit. Thus, through its international student population, other higher institutions and countries would acknowledge South Africa as an academic hub. This implies that South African higher education institutions will gain an increased number of requests from foreign institutions in recognition of their academic work (South Africa, 2017:19). Moreover, with a significant increase in international student population, South Africa could offer various research opportunities and qualifications in collaboration with foreign institutions and therefore attract even more candidates into the country (South Africa, 2017:19). Ward (2011) affirmed that having more international students can enhance the competitiveness and the international profile of the higher education institutions of the host country.

2.9 Conclusion

With the growing need and demand for international studies, international student mobility is no longer a phenomenon that can be singled out to developed nations of the western world. Therefore, in order to conduct this research, it was important to review the available literature on international student mobility. This was done in the aim to have a general understanding of the concept and to contextualize the social, cultural, and academic advantages and disadvantages for International students in South Africa.

Thereafter, the general view had to be narrowed down to Gabonese students still in the light of those disadvantages and advantages encountered while studying in South Africa. In this literature review, the advantages and disadvantages are seen as the fundamental factors that motivate the final students' decision regarding the host country. Thus, those factors are important to both students and the host nation. The next chapter discusses the methodology that was used in order to collect the data.

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter's focus will be on the overall research methodology used within the study to collect the data, in order to explain the factors influencing Gabonese international students to further their tertiary education in South Africa. Explanation of research design, sampling method, questionnaire design as well as data collection and lastly data analysis will be explained.

3.2 Research design

A research design is a structured explanation of how data was collected within an empirical study. It is the part of the study that provides answers to research questions or hypotheses being tested (Bhattacherjee, 2012:35).

3.2.1 Paradigm

According to Bhattacherjee (2012:12), the way a research is conducted is framed by "our mental model or frames of references" that one uses to shape one's thinking process and interpretations. These models or frames are known as the research paradigm. The research paradigm is then "a cluster of beliefs" which voices what should be researched, how the study was conducted, and findings explained (Bryman, 2012:630). The research paradigm enabled the researcher to make sense and reconcile different views about the same social phenomenon (Bhattacherjee, 2012:17).

Therefore, the research paradigm in social science research mainly revolves around two essential principals of philosophical beliefs: ontology and epistemology (Bhattacherjee, 2012:18).

3.2.2 Ontological position

The ontological position is viewed as the question pertaining to the nature of reality of a research, whether it has an existence apart from the social actors or it is built from their views or experiences (Bryman, 2012:28). Within this position, two views are opposed, namely: Objectivism and Subjectivism (also known as constructionism).

Objectivism avows that social phenomenon and the connotations that may result from it having a reality that is not linked to the social actors (Bryman, 2012:29). On the hand, subjectivism considers that the nature of reality is not a fixed one and is in constant change as it is the result of what is being done by social actors (Bryman, 2012:29; Tuli, 2010:101).

Since the study reflects the standpoints of Gabonese students that took part in the study, the research was set within the subjectivism position. Subjectivism allowed the research to introduce a precise version of the nature of a reality rather than a definite and everlasting one (Bryman, 2012:28). Through subjectivism, the study was able to present a social reality of the social actors (Gabonese students) about the phenomon being studied (furthering their tertiary education in South Africa).

3.2.3 Epistemological position

This approach concerned what is acceptable as knowledge and what is not, regarding whether social research must be conducted according to similar values, processes, techniques and ethos as natural sciences (Bryman, 2012:24). Within this position, two views are opposed, namely: positivism and interpretivism.

Positivism supports the view that the creation of knowledge within a study should be limited to "what can be observed and measured" and is, therefore, an affirmation that approaches used in natural sciences should be used for a study involving social reality (Bryman, 2012:28; Bhattacherjee, 2012:18). However, interpretivism advocates the idea that social reality is not objective but made by someone's own experience, interpretation or perception within a specific social context (Bhattacherjee, 2012:103; Mills et al., 2010:903).

Since the explanation of factors influencing Gabonese students to study in South Africa was possible through their views and experiences, the epistemological position for this study, therefore, lies within the interpretivism approach.

3.2.4 Research approach

According to Welman et al. (2006:6), two central approaches exist in research, namely quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Quantitative research implies that the research has to be restricted to observable and measurable items, people, phenomenon. This means that quantitative researches must be undertaken separately from feelings, judgement and belief of individuals. However, in qualitative research, it is inappropriate to use strict natural-scientific methods for collection and interpretation of data. In qualitative research, it is inappropriate to use strict natural-scientific methods for collection and interpretation. Therefore, qualitative research entails that, the natural scientific method is suitable for the study of molecules or organisms. Thus, it does not apply to phenomena that are studied in the human behavioural sciences (Welman et al., 2006:6).

3.2.4.1 Qualitative approach

The study intended to explain the factors influencing international students to further their tertiary education in South Africa, precisely those from Gabon studying in Cape Town. The study was conducted through a qualitative approach, as it involves a thorough comprehension of "human behaviour and the reasons that govern human behaviour" and usually "investigates the why and how of decision-making" (Bryman, 2012:29). Furthermore, compared to quantitative research that uses numeric data, qualitative research uses interviews or observations among others which are non-numeric data. As those data do not lead to counting or measuring, they answer questions regarding "experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant" (Bhattacherjee, 2012:103; Hammarberg et al., 2016: 499).

Qualitative approach was suitable as the students generated knowledge from their own views or interpretation as well as any other events and contexts that may have shaped those views and interpretations. The sets of answers given by each student were not the same but eventually related to some themes (which were explained in Chapter Four).

3.2.4.2 Case study

The researcher made used of case study design to conduct this study as the population targeted the Gabonese students registered at tertiary level. The geographical area was in this case, the City of Cape Town.

Having those two parameters set, the researcher was agreed with Zainal (2007:1), who affirmed that a case study is a detailed investigation, which collects data over a precise time frame, about a phenomenon, usually involving "a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of the study". As the Gabonese student' community living in Cape Town is not of a large number, the case study approach allowed the study of factors influencing Gabonese international students to further their tertiary education in South Africa. Within this context, the case study produced meaningful and comprehensive data that could be used "in an interpretive manner for theory building" (Bhattacherjee, 2012:91).

3.3 Sampling

In qualitative research, it is generally difficult to study an entire population, due to time, financial or logistic constraints. Hence a selection of a representative part of the population must occur, this selection is known as sampling (Bhattacherjee, 2012:65).

3.3.1 Population

According to Bhattacherjee (2012:65), a population is any person, items, institutions or organisation with the features that a researcher would like to study. The population that was targeted for this study was made up of Gabonese students studying at a tertiary level in South Africa and precisely within a higher education institution within the city of Cape Town.

3.3.2 Sample frame

According to Bryman (2012:116), contrary to quantitative research, qualitative research depends on motivations explaining diverse features of human behaviour. Therefore, the need is for smaller but focused samples instead of big and random ones. Therefore, since the latest known number of Gabonese students show that there were 548 in South Africa (Campus France, 2017:26), with approximately 200 studying in Cape Town, the sample frame for this study is made up of 25 students.

3.3.3 Non-probability sample

Due to the availability and location of students within the city of Cape Town, the task to reach out to all of them was difficult. For this study, the non-probability sampling method was used as the research took into consideration that it would have been nearly impossible to be able to include all units of analysis. This is in accordance with Bhattacherjee (2012:65), who stated that non-probability sampling is a method where some units have no chance at all to be selected, which implies that the selection probability cannot be exactly established.

3.3.3.1 Purposive sampling

The objective in purposive sampling is to select participants in a strategic manner, so that the participants are relevant to the study questions, as the intention was not to select participants of this study on a random basis. Furthermore, the researcher had to make use of his contacts and rely on available studies in order to ensure that there was a variety in the subsequent sample which was representative of the population under study (Bryman, 2012:419; Welman et al., 2006:19). Within purposive sampling, the researcher opted for the snowball sampling method, as this method implies that the researcher samples few people with the relevant characteristics for the study and asked them to suggest other participants known by them who meet the requirements, who themselves will recommend other participants (Bhattacherjee, 2012:70; Bryman, 2012:424).

As the researcher himself is a foreign student in South Africa and precisely in Cape Town, it was not difficult to find few Gabonese students at tertiary level willing to participate in this study. Therefore, on the referral of the president of the Gabonese student's society in Cape Town and some other students primarily sampled, other Gabonese students willing to take

part of this study were found. The individuals primarily selected were used as the informants for the other set of participants; this was repeated until the desired sample size of 25 Gabonese students was reached.

3.4 Questionnaire design and data collection

According to Welman et al., (2006:174), the choice to design a questionnaire for data collection should be the conclusion of thorough thinking. The concepts and elements involved as well as the relationships under investigation must be clear and must lead the process of the questionnaire design. The questionnaire should only contain questions that have a relation to the research questions. Furthermore, the researcher must look for as many as possible studies about the same topic.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interview

In qualitative research, the approach is less structured; unlike in quantitative research, the researcher's focus is not on getting answers for a definite number of questions. In qualitative research, there is rather an emphasis on generalizing the formulation of original research ideas and on participants' own perspectives. Therefore, qualitative interviews tend to be flexible as the researcher can manage to steer the interview in the direction of the interviewees' answers. Furthermore, developing (follow-up) questions can be asked in order to clarify a point, as through the interview the researcher would like to get rich and detailed information (Bryman, 2012:470). The research was then conducted by means of semi-structured interviews (*Appendix A*). This decision was motivated by the fact that semi-structured interviews gave the freedom to slightly move away from the questions. For instance, in the case of further explanations needed to substantiate the answer, to vary the order and formulation of the questions according to the respondent (Welman et al., 2006:167).

3.4.2 Face-to-face interview

According to Bhattacherjee, (2012:106), in social qualitative research, the most frequently used technique for data collection along with focus groups is face-to-face interviews. Kvale and Brinkman (2009:128) stated that the interview should not demotivate the participants to give their opinion about their lives. However, since face-to-face interviews require the physical presence of the interviewer and the disclosure of private or sensitive information, this detail should not represent an issue in any way for the interviewees. Therefore, the researcher decided to use the premises of the Gabonese student's society in Cape Town for the participants to feel comfortable in an environment which they are used to and respected their right not to answer certain questions.

Furthermore, the researcher took some minutes to thank each participant and briefly explained the study and the reasons why their participation was crucial. The face-to-face interviews took place in a friendly atmosphere to put the participants at ease. As the researcher is multi-lingual, the interviews were conducted in English or French according to the preferred choice of the participants. The vocabulary used in both languages was in layman's terms and generally comprehensible which prevented misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Before starting, the participants had the chance to have a look at the questionnaires in addition when needed, time was given to participants to briefly think about their responses, which allowed them to give more detailed answers.

3.4.3 Open-ended questions

According to Welman et al., (2006:174), closed-ended questions allow the interviewees to select from a variety of answers, either from a show card or verbally. On the contrary, open-ended questions offer the possibility to the researcher to ask questions without any expectation with regards to the variety of answers given as interviewees' replies are transcript verbatim.

The questions asked intended to gain an insight into the factors influencing Gabonese students to further their tertiary education in South Africa in order to explain this phenomenon. Therefore, the questionnaire was made of up 16 questions which were structured according to different aspects of this study. Section A of the questionnaire intended to gather demographic information, section B was about the respondents' knowledge of South Africa and South African higher education system before studying in the country. Section C referred to the respondents' viewpoints about the visa and school application process. Section D of the questionnaire intended to have the respondents' point of views about the advantages, while section E touched on the challenges. Lastly section F alluded to the benefit of international student mobility.

3.4.4 Pre-testing

An essential part of the interview process is the piloting stage, usually identified as the pre-testing stage. This stage obliges the researcher to test the research instrument with the same conditions in which it would be subjected during the data collection phase. This stage was not undertaken for results purpose but to ensure that no issues would obstruct the research instrument to collect data in the way it is supposed to do (Adolphus, n.d.). To ensure the pre-testing, the researcher decided to interview the first two participants beforehand. No problems related to the understanding of the questions or any other difficulties emerged from those interviews.

3.4.5 Choice of Gabonese student's society in Cape Town

The researcher decided to work with the Gabonese student's society in Cape Town because if it had been chosen to work with the different institutions within the city of Cape Town, this path would have been time-consuming and administratively complicated. Permission from each international student department of each institution would have been required. Due to the high number of higher education institutions in the city of Cape Town, it would have been logistically and administratively difficult to visit each of them to request and follow up for the letters of consent. The choice was then made to work with the Gabonese student's society in Cape Town, as it is non-profit organisation serving as a cultural, social and administrative platform gathering students from Gabon living in Cape Town.

3.4.6 Letter of consent and consent form

A letter for permission for collection of data was drafted and signed by the Faculty of Business and Management sciences of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) (*Appendix F*). This letter was addressed to the office of the president of the Gabonese student's society in Cape Town. A response in the form of a letter of consent (*Appendix E*) was received permitting the researcher to conduct his research. Afterwards, a meeting was scheduled with the president and four other Gabonese students (all members of his office) for them to have further explanations on the purpose of the study and explain that they would be the first group of individuals taking part in the study. Furthermore, it was explained that recommendations from them to other students would be necessary for this study to increase the chances to get the desired number of students.

The researcher also drafted a consent form (*Appendix B*) that had to be signed by each participant as a caution that they understood the purpose of the study and that they willingly took part of this study. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:73) affirmed that a consent form is required to inform the participants about the general purpose of the study and the main features of the research design.

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research cannot be independent of the researcher and usually deals with the analysis of data such as transcripts from interviews or texts. It requires the researcher to understand the social background in which data is obtained and strong analytical and integrative skills. Furthermore, "a creative and investigative mindset based on an ethically enlightened and participant-in-context attitude is needed" (Bhattacherjee, 2012:113).

3.5.1 Content analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse data collected from the face-to-face interview. Content analysis is one of the most relevant approaches when it comes to qualitative analysis of document or interview transcripts, as it encompasses a search for unrevealed themes in the data collected (Bryman, 2012:557). This approach allows data to emerge for the researcher to recognize their importance, as well as "for understanding the meaning of the context in which an item being analysed (and the categories derived from it) appeared" (Bryman, 2012:714). Thus, qualitative content analysis allowed the researcher to concentrate on understanding the meaning of the data collected instead of shifting his focus of themes frequency.

3.5.2 Transcript

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews through a voice recorder and personal memos. The researcher had to detail the content of those interviews into raw text data in order to be able at a later stage to easily analyse the data. These raw text data are called transcripts. According to Welman et al. (2006:211), those transcripts allowed the researcher to turn raw data into readable, editable (for accuracy) commented on and analysable research outputs (Welman et al., 2006:211). The transcript for each participant is provided in *Appendix G1* to *G25*.

3.5.3 Thematic analysis

Once the interviews were turned into transcripts (available in *Appendix G1* to *G25*), the data collected were of a vast amount as 25 Gabonese students participated in this study. To maximize the accuracy of data analysis, the researcher decided to categorize the data according to their theme's relevance. This was possible by means of thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is the means to extract data utilizing key themes and divide them into different categories that easily allow their analysis. Furthermore, the themes are regarded as general meaning that can be chosen before, during or after the collection of data (Bryman, 2012:714; Welman et al., 2006:211). Thus, the thematic classification of information allowed the researcher to better identify patterns from the respondents' perspective which in return helped the research to better analyse and understand the information gathered.

3.5.4 Data coding

According to Bryman (2012:564), data coding means that the researcher's memo and transcripts have to be reviewed which will eventually lead to the naming of parts that will be important or have a significance in terms of the social reality of the participants. Welman et al. (2006:213) citing Miles and Huberman (1994), stated that the coding difficulty for quality

research lies with the fact that it is achieved through words and descriptions and not numbers, which means that various meanings can be attached to a word. The resolution to this problem is to transform words into numbers or symbols but to keep the words and utilize them with numbers or symbols during the analysis (Welman et al., 2006:213). For this study, the researcher had to go through all interview transcripts and noted the different themes that emerged from each unstructured interview. Once this task had been completed, all themes that had been gathered were then put into broader themes reflecting tangible and meaningful aspects of the interviews with the participants.

Data coding is, therefore, an inevitable aspect of qualitative data analysis as it enables the researcher to create knowledge and understand it through the ever-changing characteristic data within qualitative research (Bryman, 2012:564). Furthermore, coding appears to be in a continuous state of possible change and fluidity. In qualitative data analysis, "data are treated as potential indicators of concepts, and the indicators are constantly compared" (Bryman, 2012:564).

3.6 Quality

According to Bryman (2012:143), the most important point that lies with ethical issues is a major principle of the ethical integrity of research: its quality. Consequently, it is important to determine how the quality of a qualitative research will be established and assessed, in order to have reliable and valid research (Bryman, 2012:390).

3.6.1 Triangulation

Notwithstanding the research design, the study must gather as much and as various data as possible, that could help produce the best possible understandings of the phenomenon being studied. Moreover, the researcher must attempt to gather data through different techniques such as observations, documents, interviews or secondary data in order to have a worthy level of analysis which will adequately answer the researcher's questions (Bhattacherjee, 2012:41). Therefore, triangulation implies the analysis of secondary data that has previously been gathered and tabulated by different sources (Bhattacherjee, 2012:39). So, in order to ensure the validity of the results, the researcher verified the data collected with the existing literature available about the same topic

3.7   Ethical consideration

Ethical consideration is important in research to avoid manipulation of people and organisations that could advance personal agendas and avoid researchers engaging in activities that are opposed to academic conduct (Bhattacherjee, 2012:137). Furthermore, Bryman (2012:135) affirmed that ethical consideration in social research is divided into four major areas not to transgress: no harm to participants; no lack of informed consent; no

invasion of privacy; and ensuring that there is no deception (as in when the researcher portrays his work as something other than what it is).

Hence during this study, the researcher ensured that the study was:

- described to the participants so that they were aware of what to expect;
- voluntary to the participants: their consents were sought beforehand as well as their right to withdraw respected if wishing to do so;
- debriefed with participants at the end of the interview;
- not deliberately misleading any participants and not risky physically nor psychologically;
- not obliging participants to answers all questions.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter explained the methodology used for this research and was divided into the following subsections: research design, sampling method, questionnaire design and data collection, data coding and data analysis. The next chapter presents the findings as well as an analysis of the data collected through the above-mentioned methodology.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings generated from the data collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions during the face-to-face interview. The researcher discusses and compares the findings with theories and body of literature presented in chapter two.

4.2 Semi-structured interviews

The findings are presented in a section-by-section and question-by-question basis as it appears in the questionnaire *(Appendix A)* and with relevance to the themes that emerged.

4.2.1 Section A: Demographic questions

Section A of the of the semi-structured interviews encompasses demographic questions.

4.2.1.1 Question 1

A Table C1 providing all the answers to question 1 is provided in Appendix C.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 1**

A. Preference in courses studied

The table below illustrates the distribution in percentage of the number of students registered for the three different types of courses.

Table 4.1: Distribution in courses studied

Number of students	Percentage	Courses related to
13	52%	Management
7	28%	Business
5	20%	Engineering and technology

From the Table 4.1 it appeared that Gabonese students seemed to prioritise business and management studies as well as engineering and technology courses. For instance, no courses related to natural science, education, art or law have been listed among the studies undertaken by participants. Furthermore, Gabon is not a developed nation, therefore, the needs for the Gabonese' society are not the same as the South African. Thus, it implies that students would rather study courses that could ensure them employability once they return home. This would then explain the recurrence of business-related courses such as marketing, human resources, business administration; or ensure them business and self-

employability opportunities with the presence of courses like entrepreneurship, computer sciences, civil and electrical engineering. This view corroborates those of Tati (2010:284) who affirmed that students would have a preference for educational qualifications that are responsive to the needs of labour in the economy. Hence, some courses might have a stronger attractiveness than others as the perspective of employment may be present within the factors determining the choice of course studied.

B. Presence in South Africa

The table below illustrates the distribution in years of the time spent in South Africa.

Table 4.2: Distribution in years spent in South Africa

Number of students	Percentage	Number of years
6	24%	5
5	20%	2
4	16%	6
3	12%	10
3	12%	7
2	8%	4
1	4%	3
1	4%	8

International student mobility is viewed by many theorists as a migration linked to an investment in human capital, as people with some level of education expect that qualifications acquired will give them higher returns on the educational level they have reached (Tati, 2010:284). From Table 4.2, it is evident that 76% (19) of the participants have spent between four and ten years in the country and all of them are doing post-graduate qualifications with the highest qualification being a PhD (*Appendix C*). This is an indication that, despite the eventual issues Gabonese international students encounter, they trust the South African higher education system. It also shows that Gabonese international students remain in the country after acquiring their first undergraduate qualification to further their education in a bid to increase their chances for employability once done with their studies while looking for a job.

C. Type of institutions

The table below shows the distribution of students in percentage according to the type of institutions.

Table 4.3: Distribution in higher education institutions

Number of students	Percentage	Type of institution
12	48%	Public university of technology
4	16%	Private universities
3	12%	Private colleges
2	8%	Traditional public university
2	8%	Public college
2	8%	Traditional public research university

Table 4.3 indicates that Gabonese students in Cape Town make use of all types of Higher education institutions. Public university of technology, private universities, private colleges, traditional public university, public college and traditional public research university were all among the different institutions listed. This was possible as the country provides a large number of tertiary institutions with, 26 universities and 123 PHEIs, 50 Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, 279 registered private colleges and 9 Community Education and Training (CET) colleges (South Africa, 2018:9), that can fulfil the different choices of the Gabonese international students. However, it seems that there is a preference for universities of technology as 48% of the participants representing almost half (12) of the participants are studying at such institutions (*Appendix C*). The reasons of this preference could be explained by the affordability of tuition fees, availability of courses and entry requirement at this type of institution compared to a worldwide known traditional public university, which had only one student among the participants (*Appendix C*).

4.2.2 Section B: Knowledge of South Africa and the South African higher education system

Section B of the semi-structured interviews englobe questions 2, 3 and 4 which are relevant to knowledge of South Africa and the South African higher education system.

4.2.2.1 Question 2

The study revealed that the participants' relatives had in one way or another influenced their decisions to study in South Africa. For instance, according to participants 1 (*Appendix G1*), 2 (*Appendix G2*), and 6 (*Appendix G6),* although they were not forced to choose South Africa, they had discussed this with different friends or family members who had graduated or were still studying in South African universities. During those conversations, it was explained to them how it is relatively 'easy' to study in South Africa and find employment upon their return.

Those discussions eventuality triggered their desire to study in South Africa with those relatives, therefore other possible host nations were no longer considered as an option.

Learning and speaking English has also been stated as one of the reasons to study in South Africa. learning English is regarded as a competitive advantage that could eventually help them at a further stage in their student or professional life. They claimed that the opportunity to live and study in an English-speaking country and moreover in Africa was a factor that pushed them to choose South Africa.

Financial aspect in terms of cost of living and tuition fees was also mentioned as a motivation to study in South Africa. According to participant 5 (*Appendix G5*), before South Africa he had travelled to Nigeria, while participant 11 (*Appendix G11)* had visited Ghana. Those countries were both their first options for the students, but they eventually decided to study in South Africa due to better cost of living and reasonable tuition fees. However, Participant 9 (*Appendix G9*) mentioned that he had spent two years in Canada but was no longer able to afford living there. Therefore, South Africa was his option as he was able to afford a comparable quality of education in computer sciences associated with an affordable cost of living and tuition fees.

Participant 5 (*Appendix G5*) for example, stated that among his choices South Africa was accommodating him, as the value of his scholarship was covering his tuition fees, private accommodation, travel costs, medical aid and food allowance. Meanwhile, in the USA, UK or France, he would have been required to pay an outstanding amount each academic year. Participant 21 (*Appendix G21)* mentioned that he had decided to study in Africa because it would be less expensive than living in a European or American country.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 2**

A. **Referrals from relatives/friends**

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002:84) are of the view that recommendations from friends, relatives and alumni are part of the factors influencing international students' choice of the country where they will further their tertiary education. The finding appears to validate this view as the study indicates that one of the main reasons for Gabonese students to choose South Africa as study destination was based on the perception they had of the country, and institutions from advices of relatives or alumni. The data collected showed that participants started considering South Africa as a possible option from recommendation of family members, friends and former/current students in South Africa. As only Participants 5 (*Appendix G5*), 8 (*Appendix G8*), 11 (*Appendix G11*), 12 (*Appendix G12*), 15 (*Appendix G15)*, 16 (*Appendix G16)*, 17 (*Appendix G17*) who represent 28% (7) of participants, did not explicitly mention friends, family or alumni as the reason behind their choices. Mazzarol and

Soutar (2002:84) also supported that referrals from relatives will probably be more important the more a student has friends who study in the host country or has friends and family members who have been in the host country for any other reasons.

B. English

Tati (2010:292) argues that English as a language of learning and communication does not act as an obstacle to the influx of French-speaking international students in South Africa. This view is confirmed in this study as English was stated amongst the reasons that influenced the choice of South Africa as a study destination. This finding strengthens those of Lee and Sehoole (2015:840) as well as Mpinganjira and Rugimbana (2009:), who stated that in addition to familial connections and regardless of advantageous or disadvantageous conditions in the students' home countries, students could pursue international education due to other personal reasons like an interest in studying and practising in English. Thus, proficiency in English is an advantage and influencing factor for Gabonese international students to choose South Africa to further their tertiary education.

C. Financial aspect and scholarship

Financial factors were also part of the factors around Gabonese international students furthering their tertiary education in South Africa. However, the financial factors split into two, firstly there are factors related to the cost of education in terms of tuition fees as data established that South Africa offered a good value-for-money education system. The second aspect of the financial factors was related to the affordability of the cost of living, which was possible through the relatives' financial contribution, part-time jobs as well as scholarships. Mpinganjira (2012:263) provides a similar analysis by asserting that the low cost of living followed by low tuition fees are among the most important factors influencing the choice to study in South Africa. Furthermore, he affirmed that lower cost of living and tuition fees must be interpreted according to the major challengers of South Africa which are the developed countries such as the UK, France, USA and Canada. Compared to a developing country like South Africa, the cost of living and tuition fees in the abovementioned countries are higher. This comparison is, for instance, relevant for participant 9 (*Appendix G9*) who had studied in Canada before relocating to South Africa due to financial constraints, or participant 8 (*Appendix G8*) who stated that "*I was supposed to study in the UK, however the tuition fees were too expensive, so I chose South Africa*".

D. Qualitative education

Data from The World University Rankings (2019) pointed out that South African universities are regarded as providing quality education. This factor was established by the fact that South African universities were topping the chart of the best universities in Africa, hence

participant 14 (*Appendix G14*) claimed that he came here because of "*the good reputation of the South African universities*". This assertion relates to Beine et al. (2014:45) who cited a study by Van Bouwel (2009) affirming that publications and citations in world publication, as well as the number of national universities within diverse educational ranking papers, are qualitative indicators having an impact on the size and direction on international students' flow. Furthermore, South African higher education institutions have reputable higher qualifications programmes, which influence the choice of international students (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:839; Mpinganjira, 2012:264).

4.2.2.2 Question 3

A full 100% (25) of the participants mentioned that before their arrival, South Africa was not an unknown destination to them. However, most of the information they had, was about the struggle for freedom of the then segregated South African society. The first black president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, allusion to soap operas such as *Sarafina* or *Shaka Zulu* were cited. Participant 13 (*Appendix G13*) for instance, mentioned novelist Joseph Diescho, and claimed that "*if under Apartheid South Africa was able to have such alumni it means that during democracy it would even be better". Therefore,* he *"did not hesitate when time came to choose*" South Africa as his study destination. Data showed that knowledge of about South Africa also referred to the racial attacks that usually occur in the country. Participant 2 (*Appendix G2*) explained that, initially he had no wish to study in South Africa as the only information he heard was about the abuses foreign nationals were subjected to. In addition, he claimed that he heard that the country had a "*high level of criminality"* with rapes, robberies, murders being referred to as a "*common thing*".

- **Interpretation of findings from question 3**

A. Cultural and Societal knowledge

Data showed that, coming to South Africa was also a choice based on the information students and their families had of the country. To substantiate this statement, data showed that 100% of participants (25) had certain knowledge about South Africa; however, it appeared that cultural and societal knowledge are the two factors that emerged from the awareness of participants before their arrivals.

Cultural knowledge narrates the participants' views regarding the attractiveness of South Africa with historical facts such as the freedom of black people, the advent of the first black African president in South Africa, prestigious alumni and the influence of the South African culture. This point was also mentioned by Lee and Sehoole (2015:840), who posited that some international students across different regions were influenced by their interest of the South African culture and history. Nonetheless, it also appeared that negative factors based

on the South African society were known to the participants. Facts mostly related to attacks on foreign nationals were echoed to them and created fear that they would be subjected to such treatments. Nevertheless, upon discussions with relatives and alumni, Gabonese international students still decided to study in South Africa. Therefore, since negative factors were known to the participants, it implies that a thorough decision was undertaken before choosing South Africa. Thus, it could be assumed that to arrive at a positive decision despite being aware of negative aspects, societal factors had a 'soft power' effect. Their minds changed through advice from alumni or relatives who had been in the country and positive cultural aspects of the South African society portrayed through tv shows and worldwide known personalities.

4.2.2.3 Question 4

Of participants, 92%   (23) stated that they had no problem with the difference in fees between international students and those of the SADC region. Only participants 1 (*Appendix G1*) and 2 (*Appendix G2*) stated that it was an issue to them, while the rest seemed to understand the need for a difference in school fees between international students and those of the SADC region (including South African ones).

However, the reasons causing them to be understanding are not the same across the participants. Participant 5 (*Appendix G5*) for instance, saw no problem with that because he had a scholarship, therefore he was not concerned by the difference in fees as according to him the scholarship covered the tuition fees. Participants 3 (*Appendix G3*), 8 (*Appendix G8*), 11 (*Appendix G11*), 16 (*Appendix G16*), 19 (*Appendix G19*) and 21 (*Appendix G21*) stated that as students they came to South Africa to acquire skills and qualifications, consequently South African higher education institutions sell skills and training, so the difference is "*understandable*". Other participants did not give much importance to this because even with the difference, tuition fees are still affordable compared to western countries. This was the case for participant 9 (*Appendix G9*) who had lived in Canada for two years and confirmed that this had no impact on him as it was still less than what he would have paid in Canada. Participant 23 (*Appendix G23*) had the same view as he had lived in the USA and was forced to relocate after a year to South Africa as he was no longer able to afford the tuition, accommodation and living expenses. Participants 7 (*Appendix G7*), 10 (*Appendix G10*), 17 (*Appendix G17*), 25 (*Appendix G25*) affirmed that they did not pay much attention to the difference; moreover, it did not bother them as they studied in private institutions and knew that they would pay a high price.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 4**

A. **Satisfactory fees**

From the data collected, it was clear that participants had no issues with the difference in tuition fees between South African and other international students from the SADC region as only 8% of participants (2) mentioned that it was an issue to them. The participants' views indicate that higher tuition fees paid are a fair practice that follows an economic approach. Due to the internationalisation of higher education, the South African higher education system needs to remain competitive in knowledge production and dissemination processes (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015:106) by investing more money into its higher education institutions. Therefore, part of this money comes from the students enrolled in those institutions. This is in agreement with Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2015:106) who believe that globalization profiles higher education institutions according to market elements enabling education to be a merchantable product. Students are nowadays regarded as consumers by higher education intuitions which themselves are regarded as sellers by students.

Thus, from the data, it can be assumed that Gabonese international students understood the need for the South African higher education system to proceed in such way. This eventually could lead them to increase the tuitions fees as time goes but without being a challenge to students as the cost remained less expensive than those in western countries but yet the education is of good quality. Therefore, the researcher's view is that this factor cannot be considered as a challenge for Gabonese students to choose South Africa as their study destination.

4.2.3 Section C: Application process

Section C of the semi-structured interviews consists of questions 5 and 6 relevant to the application process.

4.2.3.1 Question 5

The data collected showed that there are differences between the visa application process in Gabon compared to the one in South Africa. Participant 25 (*Appendix G25*), for instance, explained that the South African embassy in Gabon would not directly deal with the students but instead would employ Gabonese citizens as representatives of the office who would not understand the matter of urgency of the application. Participant 3 (*Appendix G3*) indicated that the embassy required many documents; for instance, he was asked to produce an affidavit from the person hosting him in the country. This affidavit had to stipulate how long the person was intending to accommodate him. He had to produce a rental agreement and

another affidavit from the owners stating that they were aware of his arrival. Furthermore, he stated that such documents were not easy to obtain as it took him approximatively three months before gathering them.

Participant 6 (*Appendix G6*) explained that there was a language barrier as the list of documents to submit were already written in English; meanwhile by the time of the application she had not yet learnt English. Thus, she had to pay for translation fees to know what was needed for the application. After gathering all documents, she had to translate them into English which increased the amount spent as according to her the application fees were already expensive. Participant 19 (*Appendix G19*) stated that in case of rejection there was no possibility for an appeal as it is the case in South Africa, the applicant had to restart the whole process as well as pay for everything one more time.

Contrary to the visas issued in Gabon, the data showed that the application process in South Africa was better handled. Participant 12 (*Appendix G12*) said that the list of documents to submit was clear and unambiguous. He knew exactly what to submit, there were a precise time, date and venue. Participant 8 (*Appendix G8*) stated that "*the whole process took 4 to 5 weeks*" to be finalised and he received his student permit. He mentioned that the VFS' online platform made it possible to proceed with secured payment and track his application online. He also received text messages updating him on the different steps towards the issuance of his permit.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 5**

A. Difference in visas issued in Gabon vs visas issued in South Africa

According to Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2017:111), international student mobility depends on various flexible elements such as entry mechanisms, conducive visa procedures. However, the data point out that application process had different impacts according to where the students applied. Data showed that visas issued in Gabon resulted from a low-quality service during the application process. This occurred because of a non-possibility for appeal combined with a non-comprehension of the relevant documentation needed for the issuance of a study permit and because the Gabonese personnel hired did not necessarily speak English.

This is contrary to the application process in South Africa, which is a much better experience as data showed that visas issued in South Africa were administratively on processed time and handled better through VFS. Knowing that it is no longer possible to apply for a study visa while already in South Africa, the only option available to students is to apply directly from home. Thus, according to this study, the application process is a challenge for Gabonese international students which is opposed to the view of Lee and Sehoole

(2015:840) regarding international students from SADC who claimed that the visa application process is quite flexible. In consequence, the above-mentioned reasons could explain why applications for a study visa get rejected or are pending for those who applied in Gabon. Therefore, even though the mobility of international students within Africa tends to have improved since the 1990s, it also faces challenges with visa procedures being a concern for many students when they choose to study abroad (Nghia, 2015:5; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2017:111).

4.2.3.2 Question 6

Participants 7 (*Appendix G7*), 10 (*Appendix G10*), 15 (*Appendix G10*), 17 (*Appendix G17*), 23 (*Appendix G23*) and 25 (*Appendix G25*) mentioned that upon their applications being submitted they had spoken to a student advisor who provided all information needed regarding their courses. They also stated that communication with the student advisor did not end after the first meeting but continued through follow-ups (emails and calls) to ensure that they had all the required documents to make the most accurate choice and do not miss any deadline. After the application, they were able to contact the student advisor to get updates until they were accepted. Participant 10 (*Appendix G10*) stated that this proximity with a representative of the institution put him at ease as he had an interlocutor whom he could talk to.

Data revealed that the application process did not always go smoothly as 32% of participants (8) explicitly mentioned that help from relatives, friends or students from their respective institutions were required to assist with the application process. They stated that it was "*difficult*" for them to find the information about their courses, as none would be available to assist them. Except for the application officers who were not always of great use except for the collection of application forms. For instance, participants 5 (*Appendix G5*) and 20 (*Appendix G20*) stated that their institutions do not have student advisors, therefore except for the information gathered by themselves or from the institution's website, there was no further information available. They also indicated that, although they attended their institutions' open days, once on campus everyone seemed to be too busy to assist them. Participant 14 (*Appendix G14*) claimed that he encountered difficulties as no information for his course was available on campus as none would want to talk to him. Furthermore, he claimed that to his view the institution's website was not user friendly and did not provide much information. Participant 11 (*Appendix G11*) claimed that he encountered issues as his application form was declared lost, as the application desk could not find his form. In consequence, he "*had to gather all documents in a matter of hours*" to reapply.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 6**

A. **Application at private institutions vs at public institutions**

Data showed that application processes at the higher education institutions were different according to the type of institutions. Differences were noticed between the private and public higher education institutions. In private institutions, application processed were made easier by the presence of a student advisor who played a pivotal role in assisting and advising prospective students in their search for the desired courses. This assistance had a double implication as it eased the search for the student but secured the enrolment of a prospective student for the institution. This is in accordance to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002:82) views that the number of institutions from which a future student can decide to choose is so large that the decision to join a specific institution is a trade-off and will probably be influenced by views from friends, family, and student counsellors.

Although Mpinganjira (2012:262) affirmed that, notwithstanding the problems related to marketing services, countries and higher education institutions should have an interest in understanding the factors influencing students' application as it has a bearing on their capacity to increase the fit between students and themselves. However, according to this study, it seems that public institutions seemed not to take this view into consideration, as difficulty to find basic information such as which course to apply for; whom to speak to; where to find the application desk; where to find the international students' helpdesk as well as websites not providing accurate information and not being user friendly occurred. Furthermore, the internal administrative handling process itself seemed to be an issue as some applications were misplaced, if not lost, as well as acceptance letters not issued on time. Therefore, the application process is a challenge for Gabonese international students.

4.2.4 Section D: Advantages of the South African higher education system

Section D of the semi-structured interviews is made up of questions 7, 8 and 9 with regards to the advantages of the South African higher education system.

4.2.4.1 Question 7

From the data collected it can be asserted that the quality of education in Gabon compared to South Africa is generally low, as 92% of participants (23) alluded to this in their answers. Participant 18 (*Appendix G8*) stating that "*The quality of education in Gabon is chaotic*". One of the reasons mentioned was student unrests which often happen and prevent students from graduating on time. Participant 23 (*Appendix G23*), for instance, thought that "*the entire Gabonese education system needs changes if its institutions wish to one-day reach the level of other countries in Africa*". Another reason mentioned was the fact that the Gabonese

higher education system often "*overcrowds*" students with numerous courses that are not relevant for the desired course or that do not go according to the needs of the market. According to participant 20 (*Appendix G20*), the Gabonese system has "*unnecessary subjects*", he claimed that "*in Gabon, we have too many subjects which teach you things that students will not need for their professional careers".* Participant 8 (*Appendix G8*) claimed that Gabonese students must pass subjects that are not based on the curriculum of their qualifications. Participants 4 (*Appendix G4*) and 13 (*Appendix G13*) claimed that due to a shortage of courses, students must choose among courses that are offered to them; however, those are not necessarily their first choice.

Participant 6 (*Appendix G6*) raised the issue that the Gabonese higher education's quality is impeded by the overcrowding of most of its higher education institutions. She claimed that the Gabonese higher education system is not able to accommodate the growing number of students that try to register each year, nor are able to have enough lecturers for them.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 7**

A. Student unrests, lack of qualification and overcrowded capacities

Data showed that the Gabonese education system has no qualities that could be highlighted, instead difficulties were stated. Students would rather leave for South Africa, instead of enrolling in a higher education institution in Gabon as the country suffers from recurrent student unrests, lack of qualifications offered and overcrowding of its capacities.

The study points out that Gabonese higher education institutions are hampered by a high number of student unrests. This partially explains why Gabonese international students would rather leave their country instead of taking the risk to lose one or more academic years studying in institutions subjected to those troubles. From the data, it could be argued that compared to South Africa, Gabonese education's quality is of an insufficient level, as its higher institutions of education offer courses with subjects that seemed to be irrelevant for the final qualifications. This raises another issue as the qualifications offered are not orientated to the needs of the market. This outcome seems to relate to those of Nyarko and Ephraim (2016:184) stipulating that obsolete study programmes not adapted to the needs of society is a factor causing students to travel to other countries to pursue higher education. In consequence, students are trained towards qualifications, which do not help them to find a job once they have graduated.

Furthermore, courses that prospective students could choose from are already overcrowded. This was also found by Mouyissi (2015), who reported that the failure of the quantitative management results in overcrowded classes. Therefore, data indicated that the South

African higher education system is of a better quality as it is more advanced compared to the Gabonese one.

4.2.4.2 Question 8

From the data collected, it has emerged that one of the qualities cited was that the South African higher education institutions have fewer student unrests than Gabon. Participant 6 (*Appendix G6*) mentioned that, in South Africa "t*here are no student unrests as the ones that occur in Gabon, here student can finish the year without fear of being affected by student unrests*". While participant 9 (*Appendix G9*) affirmed that, "*what I appreciate more is that is although we had student unrests in my university it did not really affect students as those strikes did not last long. Here compared to Gabon strikes on campus are always resolved peacefully and alternatives are taken so that students are not impacted*".

Accessibility to student facilities was mentioned as another quality of South African higher education institutions. Free access to equipped libraries, laboratories, e-learning facilities, shuttle service, student clinics, free Wi-Fi to name a few contribute greatly to the students' success in South African higher education institutions. Participant 17 (*Appendix G17*) stated that "*We have access to library, E-learning facility and students' shuttles*", while participant 4 (*Appendix G4*) declared "*It is a good university…There are laboratories for students, we have access to Wi-Fi on campus as well as library open until late*".

Support for students, was also listed as a quality, as it was understood and acknowledged that French-speaking students' ability to understand in class could be affected. Participant 6 (*Appendix G6*) claimed that "*lecturers do pay attention to us foreign students and spend more time explaining to you than he would do to someone who speaks English".* Thus, extra explanations either in or after classes usually took place in the form of student mentor programmes. For instance, participant 12 (*Appendix G12*) stated that he took part in such programmes within his higher education institution, which was mostly attended and conducted by other international students, while doing his undergraduate studies.

Lecturers that are easily accessible on campus, always available and ready to listen to students seemed to be another quality representing a qualitative advantage. Participant 13 (*Appendix G13*), for instance, mentioned that "*what I appreciate the most is that lecturers are actually available for students. They are reachable, they always listen to students, which for me is an advantage as if a student has an issue it can be fixed quickly".* Participant 15 (*Appendix G15*) praised the professionalism of his lecturers by stating that they were "*professional towards all students, they don't make a difference between foreigners and locals. You can talk to them anytime when there is an issue and even request a meeting;*

they encourage us to mention something if we believe that it was wrong or anything that we may not understand in class".

The type of qualifications has been cited as one of the elements that are part of the qualitative advantage that South African institutions offer. Participant 14 (*Appendix G14*) said that "*My university has a good quality we are offered more choices than those we could get if studying in Gabon, thus we can graduate in our preferred field and potentially find a job easily*". While participants 5 (*Appendix G5*), 8 (*Appendix G8*), 18 (*Appendix 18*) and 24 (*Appendix 24*) affirmed that this quality is also because students had a period of practical learning during the completion of their courses. The fact that South African higher education institutions offered short courses and part-time classes, was considered as a quality. Participant 19 (*Appendix G9*) affirmed that, while studying towards his master's degree he was also busy completing short courses that he believed would enhance his Curriculum Vitae once he started looking for employment. Participant 20 (*Appendix G20*), on the other hand claimed that when he failed some subjects during his second year, he was able to attend part-time classes for those failed subjects while being registered full time for his third year. This enabled him to complete his National diploma in due time although he had previously failed. Participant 5 stated that part-time classes to bridge for other desired courses are available if applicants did not necessarily have the prerequisites.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 8**

A. **Less student unrests, better facilities, support to students, professional staff, internships, short course and part-time classes**

South African higher education institutions have almost no students' unrests other than those related to accommodation, fees or racism, which did not cause disruptions that would force universities to stop their study programmes (Lee & Sehoole, 2015:830). This was nothing compared to Gabonese higher education institutions which are constantly troubled. Therefore, the opportunity for Gabonese students to undertake their studies in institutions that are less exposed to student unrests represents a qualitative advantage. South African higher education institutions have appropriate facilities that enable students to study in good conditions, knowing that having old and inadequate facilities encourages students to travel to other countries to pursue their higher education (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016:184). Those facilities and infrastructures, therefore, represent a qualitative factor enhancing the attractiveness of South African higher education institutions towards Gabonese international students.

Data revealed that South African higher education institutions employ good lecturing staff that display a high level of professionalism as Gabonese international students are being

treated equally to other students and this particularity makes them feel at ease within those institutions. Once they are part of those institutions, students have proper channels of communication and can contact their lecturer for academic purpose. The study divulged that the pedagogic help they get within their institutions from the lecturing staff is a quality and therefore an advantage that the South African higher education institutions have.

The variety of courses offered is also regarded as a quality as it emerged that those courses offered match the students' expectations. In fact, due to the lack of certain courses in Gabon, some students would choose South Africa as their study destination. The fact of having an internship represents another valuable quality factor for students. This implies that during their studies, students are exposed to proactive methods of learning, which would enable them to get practical experience of their future field of work and shape them to the reality of their different jobs.

4.2.4.3 Question 9

Of the participants, 100% (25) see the ability to speak and study in English as a benefit that could give them better chances of employability in South Africa and at an international level as English is the most used medium of communication in a business environment. Along with employability at an international level, speaking English was assumed to increase chances to acquire work experience in national and international organizations. Participant 4 (*Appendix G4*), for instance, noted that by speaking English he could apply for job opportunities in French-speaking as well as in English-speaking countries "*regardless of the location of those countries*". While participant 18 (*Appendix G18*) explained that the factor that enabled her to secure an internship in an international company in Gabon was speaking English, as she was able to deal with customers speaking English or French.

Participant 23 (*Appendix G23*) claimed that he was already seeing the advantage of speaking English and being bilingual as while still studying, he was employed as a part-time sales consultant in a call centre. According to him, this was due to his ability to speak English and French; he also stated that if he was not studying in South Africa, he would not have been able to get a student job and support himself financially. Participant 25 (*Appendix G25*) declared that his choice to study in South Africa was also because by speaking English he would be able to reach out to more business opportunities. According to him, after Mandarin, English is the most common language spoken in the world, therefore, speaking English empowers students and gives them more chances as they are now able to effectively communicate with far more people.

Data revealed that learning English has an academic benefit, as students can now have access to more online study materials which are published in English. Participant 16

(*Appendix G16*) mentioned that, while preparing his academic work he could study properly as he can have better content for his academic work. This is possible as he could consult diverse publications or sources from other universities as he now speaks English. Being able to speak English offers the possibility to have more choice to students, students can further their studies in other countries after the completion of their current qualifications in South Africa. Participant 10 (*Appendix G10*) illustrated this by stating that, in studying in South Africa he learnt English during his first year; however, by now he has significantly improved his vocabulary. In consequence, he had acquired better knowledge in English which will enable him to apply to any reputable universities worldwide as well as successfully pass any tests that would assess his level of English, tests such as TOEFL or International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

- **Interpretation of findings from question 9**

A. **Employability**

The study revealed that English gives a competitive advantage to Gabonese international students when it comes to employability, as speaking English could gather better chances of employment. Nowadays, speaking English is not just an ability but a business and managerial tool as it is spoken by anyone aspiring to prevail at an international and even local level. This supports the views of Deardorff et al. (2012:16), who posit that the implementation of programmes taught in English seems to be a planned decision to reinforce internationalization efforts by improving desirability to international students, enhancing graduates' readiness for work in a global or international context as well as helping to improve institutions' profile.

B. **Business opportunity**

Data showed that the ability to speak English as an additional language learnt while in South Africa could offer and also boost business opportunities for those who are most likely to be self-employed. This view seems to be opposed to those of Deardorff et al. (2012:16) that the superiority of English as the common language of international communication, research and business adds another level of difficulty for non-English-speaking African countries keen to be involved in the global knowledge economy and academic networks.

C. **Academic advantage**

From data collected, it occurred that proficiency in English represents an academic advantage, as it enables students to access and consult more study material from other universities all over the world. This is due to the increasing use of English across the globe as the first international medium of communication for scholarly publication, research and lecturing (Deardorff et al., 2012:4). Therefore, through this study, it can be stated that being

taught in English is beneficial for academic work through assignments, tests, presentations, tutorials and scopes available online since they are mostly written and translated in English. Speaking English gives a double opportunity to students to have a diversity of choice as they can also consult those available in French. Furthermore, speaking English enables Gabonese students to apply anywhere else; where English is spoken if they wish to further their studies.

4.2.5 Section E: Challenges of the South African higher education system and society

Section E of the semi-structured interviews includes questions 10, 11, 12 and 13, which are all relevant to the challenges of the south African higher education system and society.

4.2.5.1 Question 10

Of the total participants, 56% (14) mentioned that they encountered academic difficulties related to their abilities to write, understand and speak English. For instance, participant 11 (*Appendix G11*), 17 (*Appendix G17*), 20 (*Appendix G20*) and 24 (*Appendix G24*) explained that schools of English taught them general knowledge regarding the practice of English. Therefore, it enabled them to have an acceptable level in order to enter a South African higher education institution. However, when it came to technical vocabulary or jargon, that would give them an effective understanding in a study context, they had more difficulties. This issue affected them as it was more difficult for them to effectively comprehend their courses. Participants 3 (*Appendix G3*) and 20 (*Appendix G20*), for instance, claimed that they were also affected when lecturers had to resort to explanations with gestures for them to understand. Such action prompted classmates to believe that they were "*stupid*" and they were the victims of mocking in class.

Data showed that local students are not willing to interact with international students. This was also true among local students themselves. It was revealed that grouping occurred in classrooms as students' groups were only made up of black, white and coloured local students. This division forced international students to form a separate group by default. Participant 12 (*Appendix 12*) declared that "in *class there was what I would call cultural integration problems as group would be formed by black, white and Coloured (students) and the last one by international students",* while participant 14 (*Appendix 14*) affirmed that "*In class people were not sitting eating all together, I felt (like) a separation based on the race occurred in class among local students which left no options to international students (except) to have our own group*". Furthermore, it was established that this situation affected international students academically, as this grouping also occurred for study groups and group work such as assignments. Participant 2 (*Appendix 2*) stated that "*I could not find other students willing to work with me for assignment",* while participant 4 (*Appendix 4*)

claimed that this situation affected his work as he "*had to work alone when others could be in a group of two*". Therefore, the only time they found themselves working with their local classmates would be in the case of group assignments formed by the lecturer.

Data revealed that, international students were subjected to unpleasant comments from their classmates. It was stated that for some local students being an international student means being an illegal immigrant. Therefore, local students would tease them with clichés such as foreigners "*steal*" jobs from the local population or foreigners are the reason of the high level of criminality. International students would also be teased and laughed at, because they spoke "broken" English or because their accents sounded too "foreign". Participants 6 (*Appendix G6*), 8 (*Appendix G8*), and 14 (*Appendix G14*) stated that this situation was not easy to live with and the idea of facing those classmates each day made them anxious and not want to speak in class as well as not wanting go to class.

Participant 20 (*Appendix G20*) stated that during the completion of her undergraduate qualification, the search for an internship was most of the time unsuccessful, which, according to her, was because she was an international student. She was required to find an internship by herself, either in South Africa or in Gabon. Participant 23 (*Appendix G23*) stated that because he is an international student, he was not offered relevant opportunities to complete an internship in relevant organisations. Instead, he was offered the opportunity to complete his internship on his campus; however, those positions only required him to do basic tasks which were not necessarily related to the qualifications he was studying for.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 10**

A. Academic writing

Although by the completion of their first years at university, international students were already familiar with English as a medium of communication and learning, difficulties in academic writing arose. Students were not lacking knowledge regarding the discipline but even the simplest objects/items would have a specific word in English that would be unknown to them at the time. It then became difficult to speak, hear and use specific vocabulary related to their field of studies. Therefore, difficulties in academic writing relate to the findings of Pineteh and Mulu (2016:392), who asserted that, since they were firstly French speakers and the medium of learning and teaching was English, their inadequate English language skills caused them to experience academic writing difficulties and exclusion. Therefore, academic writing was regarded as a challenge faced during the completion of their different qualifications, this issue was mostly relevant for students doing engineering and finance-related courses.

B. Learning difficulties

Although students had studied English before starting their courses at their respective higher education institutions, it was difficult for them to speak it fluently. This situation caused them not to participate in class, so they would keep quiet though they had not understood what was explained. Issues also came from the difficulties to understand new accents as participants stated that with different accents from either classmates or lecturers, they sometimes failed to comprehend in class as they simply could not make them out. The result would be that they could not be able to catch up in class and always asked questions which would put more pressure on them.

Hence the researcher agrees with the views of Pineteh and Mulu (2016:393) who indicated that language proficiency stops francophone students from participating in class and forces them into a 'silent mode', propagating the misinterpretation of their language difficulties for a lack of academic skills. Moreover, such difficulties could be the cause of glossophobia, as data showed that students were scared to make mistakes while speaking in public and would rather keep quiet. Furthermore, it caused Gabonese international students to limit their communication to people they knew or even not to attend class. This could be another reason why Pineteh and Mulu (2016:391) stated that Gabonese international students often have exclusionary propensities which caused them to see themselves or to be seen by local students as 'outsiders'.

C. Unpleasant comments

Although evolving in an academic environment, classmates regarded Gabonese international students as foreign nationals who spoil the country's resources and bring insecurity. The study found that unpleasant comments that could be qualified as xenophobic (although not intended to be) were addressed to participants. This goes along with findings of Manik and Singh (2013:1), who concluded that the mindset to associate foreign nationals to detrimental behaviours like stealing the jobs of locals and criminal activities is the foundation of xenophobia. The study also found that those unpleasant comments endured by Gabonese international students affected them emotionally, as such stereotyped views demotivated them to initiate any kind of interaction unless obligated by academic requirements.

D. Racial grouping

Data indicated that an embarrassing practice occurred in classrooms, whereby local students would not acknowledge nor tolerate each other as well as international students. This matter occurred when local students would split into groups based on races when seated in class. Local students perceive international students as strangers instead of accepting diversity and creating a culture of mutual support (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016:393). This situation badly affected

participants as it framed their work, friendship and social interactions with their classmates. Furthermore, it can be deduced that this self-imposed racial grouping made international students felt unwelcome. According to Pineteh and Mulu (2016:391), the self-esteem of international students and their wishes to interact socially on campus is psychologically affected by the attitudes of local students.

E. Internship unfairness

Data indicated that inequity in internship appointments occurred, as it seems that not enough was done for international students to have appropriate opportunities to complete their practical learning. Therefore, it represents a challenge for international students as their only option not to end up performing basic administrative tasks or compulsory projects was to look for internships by themselves. However, it could be assumed that even South African organisations did not positively respond to them as most of them ended up completing their internships outside the country (usually in Gabon) although studying in South Africa.

4.2.5.2 Question 11

Data revealed that outside the academic environment, people would exclude international students from conversations by speaking local languages that they did not understand. Thus, participant 9 (*Appendix G9*) asserted that the language barrier affected him in a way that he felt unwelcome in the country. He believed that sometimes isiXhosa or isiZulu had been used in situations in which, he was being "*mocked*". Participant 23 (*Appendix G23*) therefore, stated that he decided not to "*be involved with locals and would rather not talk to them as the language barrier would eventually be an issue at some point*". Data showed that the local population would not want to accommodate foreigners in general, as it was revealed that it was difficult to make friends in South African society. International students are not easily accepted by South Africans into the society, as according to them the local population would not be willing to know anything about foreign nationals except for the clichés they have about foreigners. Participant 12 (*Appendix G12*), for instance, stated that, "*people are closed minded as the local population have not yet embraced diversity*", while participant 11 (*Appendix G11*) claimed that, "*I felt like South African people do not like foreign nationals regardless of the reason that pushed someone to be in South Africa*". Therefore, international students felt unwelcome and sometimes threatened as they faced the local population's unwillingness to interact with them. Data indicated that international students did not initiate any interaction with locals but kept it to the minimum as they feared to be victim of abuses or unfair treatments. Fourteen (56%) of participants stated that they chose not to broaden their circle of friends or acquaintances to include the local population. They claimed that they would rather remain exclusively with fellow Gabonese students and if needs to be, with other foreign nationals. For instance, participant 8 (*Appendix G8*) declared that "*All of this left me*

with no option than always to associate myself with other international students unless the situations force me to 'deal' with locals". Participant 25 (*Appendix G25*) claimed that "*I would rather not engage with these people and remain close to other foreigner or other Gabonese students*".

Data also revealed that physical and verbal abuses occurred from the local population, that left international students upset or frightened. Participants 6 (*Appendix G6*) and 16 (Appendix G16) noted that on numerous occasions they were referred to as "*makwerekwere*" by South Africans, which is a derogatory word used by the local population to refer to foreign nationals. Participants 13 (*Appendix G13*) and 21 (*Appendix G21*) claimed that on several occasions, insults were hurled at them whereby they were told to go back in their country or they were threatened to be killed just because they were foreign nationals. Similarly, participants 2 (*Appendix G2*), 5 (*Appendix G5*), 8 (*Appendix G8*), 9 (*Appendix G9*) and 13 (*Appendix G13*) stated that they all had been the victims of physical aggressions where they got robbed of their belongings, while participant 1 (*Appendix G1*) claimed to have been "*hijacked at gunpoint*".

- **Interpretation of findings from question 11**

A. Use of local dialect

Since data revealed that during their interactions with the local population, issues which at some point caused them to be in unpleasant situations were related to miscommunication or rather lack of communication. It could be affirmed that the language barrier is a challenge. Though English an official language, the republic of South Africa has eleven official languages. Those languages are spoken almost everywhere and sometimes exclusively in some areas. Therefore, it is not unusual that classmates and people at large would speak in their dialects. Although, using a dialect in the presence of foreign nationals should not be regarded as a deliberate attempt to stop them from listening. It nevertheless does so and furthermore prevent them from participating in a discussion, which on the other side creates miscommunication or misunderstanding. Thus, it is common for students and community members to use local indigenous languages to exclude foreign nationals (Manik & Singh, 2013:114). This challenge could make international students feel isolated from the local population, which once more explains why they would rather gather with fellow Gabonese or/and foreign nationals as it gives them a virtual feeling of belonging to a community (Pineteh & Mulu, 2016: 398).

B. Social grouping

Social grouping is a reflection of the racial grouping experienced by international students on campus. This could be asserted as the local population also have the same mindsets as

local students. Once outside campuses, people are also holding the same negative views about foreign nationals and would rather not be associated with them. Although this cannot be affirmed for the majority of people living in South Africa, it is nevertheless a reality which creates fear among Gabonese international students.

Furthermore, Pineteh and Mulu (2016:395) believe that the adaptation process becomes more challenging and stressful when the local population do not interact with foreign nationals due to their social behaviours. The researcher considers this factor as a challenge, explaining the choice to remain with other Gabonese international students. For instance, through a structure such as the Gabonese students' society, as they feel that they all go through the same issues and reality and therefore need each other's support. The previous statement is also argued by Pineteh and Mulu (2016:387) citing Menzies and Baron (2014), who asserted that, for international students, it is important to keep a physical or virtual connection with the country of origin through comfort and friendship in international student associations.

C. Physical and verbal abuses

The study revealed that Gabonese international students, like other foreign students, in general, are the victims of criminal activities. Though it would be wrong to assume that those actions were perpetrated by South Africans citizens only, it is nevertheless a fact that physical and verbal abuses of a xenophobic nature emerged amongst the challenges mentioned.

Data indicated that students were badly treated through physical and verbal abuses by local inhabitants. This could once more explain why they would reduce their interactions with the local population. They are reluctant to have a friendship with local individuals for fear of being the victim of an incident. Pineteh and Mulu (2016:395) stated that, by relying on other foreigners for comfort and friendship students are exposed to an alternative support system. This support system helps them to handle rejection and discrimination from local population; however, it causes them to become reluctant to adapt to their new social environment.

4.2.5.3 Question 12

Data showed that 32% of participants (8) stated that their experience regarding student accommodation was very positive; however, the reasons of this positive experience were not the same.

Participants 3 (*Appendix G3*), 20 (*Appendix G20*) and 22 (*Appendix G22*) affirmed that they did not encounter any issue as they currently or previously stayed with friends, family or other relatives. In those cases, relatives were already living in accommodations when those

students arrived and therefore decided to stay with them. Therefore, they already knew where they would be staying as instructions were given to them to either accommodate them or rent a place that would eventually have enough space upon their arrival in South Africa. Participants 7 (*Appendix G7*) and 10 (*Appendix G10*) stated that their families simply decided to buy properties in South Africa to ensure that they reside in a safe neighbourhood and do not have to pay rent each month.

Three participants stated that they never had any issue regarding student accommodation as they were always able to afford to pay and fulfil all requirements of either owners or agencies. Participant 14 (*Appendix G14*) stated that "*I did not have any problem with accommodation as I was always able to afford it as I receive enough money from my parents".* Participant 23 (*Appendix G23*) claimed that "*I was not affected by this as I receive enough money from my parents in Gabon to afford paying rent in places, I wish to live in. Moreover, I receive a salary from my part-time job".* Participant 5 (*Appendix G5*), however, stated that, since he had a scholarship, he did not regard student accommodation as a challenge as he applied for accommodation with proof of his scholarship.

It has emerged that it was difficult for students to afford the high cost of accommodations, hence they had no other option than having several people renting the same house. Participant 19 (*Appendix G19*), for instance, stated that one option would be to rent a room with another student. However, there was also the option of renting a flat with other students and splitting the cost of rent among the number of students. However, if there was a need for privacy but no possibility of affording a flat, the option would be to rent rooms within an already occupied flat. Participant 13 (*Appendix G13*) stated that in this case the rent would not be paid to the owner/agency but directly to someone living in the house. Therefore, by doing so, it would not be necessary to show proof of affordability, the rent would be paid according to a price decided on upon moving in, plus a decided amount corresponding to a deposit which would deter anyone from moving out without notice.

However, the findings showed that student accommodation is indeed an issue as 68% of participants (17) mentioned issues regarding this matter. One issue that appeared to take place was the difficulty for international students to prove their affordability for accommodation. For instance, it has emerged that an owner/agency would ask students to show a payslip with a monthly income equivalent to three times the cost of the accommodation, as stated by participant 4 (*Appendix 4*). This requirement seemed to be totally unfair as they were students and did not necessarily work, which meant that their incomes were either very small or depended on their parents. Therefore, participant 18 (*Appendix G18*) mentioned that out of desperation, she had to find someone who had such an income and was willing to apply with her in order to increase her chances of getting

accommodation. However, such service was not free, as she was required to pay that person 10% of the rent's cost each month. Data showed that a third party was not always requested to intervene, as family members or relatives back in Gabon could be asked to provide their payslips. However, even in such a case, the owner/agency did not necessarily accept it as the currency was not the same as stated by participant 15 (*Appendix G15*).

From data collected, it appeared that the cost of accommodation in Cape Town is another issue, this is mainly due to Cape Town being expensive when it comes to accommodation. This was echoed by participants 11 (*Appendix G11*), 16 (*Appendix G16*), 18 (*Appendix G18*) and 25 (*Appendix G25*) who mentioned that compared to other cities in South Africa, Cape Town is one of the most expensive when it comes to housing. Data also showed that the rental practice of paying a deposit was used as an unfair practice towards students, as it emerged that deposit requirements would be changed once students disclosed their identities. For instance, participant 9 (*Appendix G9*) stated that for a specific advertisement requiring only one month's deposit, this would be changed to three months' deposit plus two months of rent upfront. Another challenge mentioned was the yearly 10% rent increase, as according to participant 24 (*Appendix G24*), over the years this practice has increased the financial burden of an already dire situation. In consequence, it made it very difficult to be able to afford certain kinds of accommodation. Participant 6 (*Appendix G6*), for instance, claimed that discrimination took place when the owners/agencies released advertisements for accommodation specifically mentioning that they would not take applicants that are black, foreigners, students or not in possession of a South African identification document. They explained that those requirements automatically stopped them from applying. Participant 1 (*Appendix G1*) said that he experienced discrimination of a racist nature while looking for student accommodation as an agent told him off the record that he should not apply for a flat as he was black.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 12**

A. No issue regarding student accommodation due to relatives, private accommodation and affordability

It appeared that the experience of Gabonese international students regarding accommodation was not an issue for 32% of participants (8). This statement is based on the individuals' social background. In order to secure accommodation, they got their parents to buy properties in South Africa. However, not so many parents could afford such acquisition in a foreign country when they still need to pay for other expenses. Another aspect which could be deducted and which reflects the social class of those students, is that they could afford to pay for any type of private accommodation by themselves. Data showed however, that the sources of income for this affordability resulted from family allowances, part-time jobs or

scholarships. Although having scholarships or part-time jobs is not directly linked to the social class of students, they nevertheless alleviate the scarcity of financial resources. Scholarships usually make provision for student accommodation and other academic-related expenses, while part-time jobs ensure the relative availability of financial resources. Therefore, having a scholarship or a part-time job implies having an income that enables students to overcome some issues during their stay in South Africa, on the same level of significance of money that could be sent by family members from abroad.

B. Issues regarding student accommodation due to proof of income, cost/yearly increase and discrimination

The study revealed that 68% of participants (17) had to face challenges regarding student accommodation. Those challenges take place in the form of the cost of accommodation in Cape Town, which is usually higher compared to other cities. Moreover, accommodation' prices could easily rise when students decide to live in areas deemed safe and not far from campus. Added to that, some owners/agencies increase the cost of their rents every year, as those students are usually desperate for accommodation and have no other choice than accepting high prices. Challenges regarding rent also occurred based on the choices of tenants wanted by owners/agencies. Allegations regarding owners/agencies not wanting to rent their accommodation to students, foreigners, as well as black tenants, arose during this study. Students had, therefore, to find alternatives to be able either to afford to rent or even apply for accommodation. As prices rose, students resorted to a South African identification document holder to apply along with them. This was done with the aim of establishing the fact that a South African with enough money was among the tenants. From those findings, the study clearly shows that students who were affected, were those who could not afford to pay an exorbitant amount of money and sometimes deposit.

Sehoole (2015) stated that as they are usually unemployed and what is asked to pay exceeds the means at their disposal, rental issues are a huge burden for international students, especially those from less developed countries. Although data indicate that 32% of participants (8) were not subjected to challenges around accommodation, they nevertheless also indicate that accommodation is an issue for Gabonese international students.

4.2.5.4 Question 13

Although once in South Africa, students have been affected differently by safety issues, data showed that 100% of participants (25) did not change their initial decision to study in South Africa although aware of safety issues. However, data showed that prior to arriving in South Africa participants opted for Cape Town as in their view, this city was one of the safest compared to other metropoles for instance Johannesburg or Pretoria. This judgment was

based on alumni who had completed their studies in South Africa and relatives that had already been in the country for non-academic reasons. Participant 1 (*Appendix G1*), for instance, affirmed that "*safety was not really an issue as I was advised by a friend of mine who studies here that Cape Town was safer than other cities in South Africa*".

The fact that students did not change their plan to study in South Africa meant that they were not concerned for their safety in South Africa. This statement is made as data showed that compared to their lifestyle in Gabon, in South Africa they would rather not go to certain areas. They would not remain too late nor alone in an area in which they did not live or did not know anyone, as well as not hanging around with the local population. They would primarily associate themselves with fellow Gabonese students and possibly other foreign national students.

However, data also revealed that academic-related topics were more important than safety issues as students did not regard South Africa as the only student destination that could have safety issues. For instance, participant 9 (*Appendix G9*) stated that after leaving Canada, safety issues in South Africa had not affected his decision to study in the country as he only had taken in consideration the academic advantages related to his stay in South Africa. Participant 24 (*Appendix G24*) also affirmed that he had no regard for safety issues in South Africa as according to him, no country in the world would be completely safe, especially for a foreign national. Furthermore, he affirmed that if the choice had to be made, he would again choose to study in South Africa rather than in Gabon.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 13**

A. **Safety issues do not affect Gabonese international students to study in South Africa**

From the data, it appeared that safety issues were not of a great concern as students based their decision on advice from alumni, friends, family members and other relatives' who had studied or visited the country before. Safety issues have, however, affected the choice of the city where they decided to study. It was also found by Tati (2010:292) that Cape Town is preferred to Johannesburg as foreign nationals encounter less harassment. Therefore, since Cape Town was chosen as it was deemed the safest city, once in the city, students took preventive measures to minimize the risk to their safety. Measures like residing within cosmopolitan areas with other foreign nationals, renting all together in a house, socialising with people they know and in areas they are familiar with. Data also revealed that in no regard had safety issues prevailed, as only issues concerning possible academic issues were considered.

These findings are explainable by the fact, that regardless of the host country regrettable events can occur. Therefore, the study revealed that safety was regarded the same as any other issue and did not represent a problem or affect the international students' decision to study in South Africa. These findings are contrary to those of Mpinganjira (2012:264), who cited safety among the primary concerns for most international students.

4.2.6 Section F: Benefit of international student mobility

Section F of the semi-structured interviews is made of questions 14, 15 and 16 which are pertinent to the benefit of international student mobility.

4.2.6.1 Question 14

Of the participants, 84% (21) agreed that they would recommend South Africa as the host country to other Gabonese students. This was because South Africa offers the benefit to learn English in addition to the qualification each student is seeking to acquire. The level and quality of higher education in South Africa according to them is better than the one they could get in Gabon. The cost of education in South Africa was stated to be better than what they could afford in Europe or America. The efforts of the South African government and its political will to constantly improve the quality of education was seen as a guarantee that the education would always be of good quality.

Of the participants, 16% (4) stated, however, that they would not recommend South Africa as a study destination to fellow Gabonese students. One reason mentioned was the financial affordability as at some point it could become expensive to study in South Africa, if other expenses added to tuition fees are taken in consideration. For instance, participant 2 (*Appendix G2*) said that "*the fees which according to me are accessible but adding all other expenses together requires students to pay too much money*". Participant 22 (*Appendix G2*) based his negative answer on the fact that "*a South African qualification it is not really an advantage in the sense that the qualifications acquired here still need to be evaluated according to the level of the country where one would like to study or work*". The view that foreign students have more difficulties than local students to enrol at local higher education institutions also arose as participant 14 (*Appendix G14*) elaborated on it by stating that it would be easier for Gabonese students to study in France.

- **Interpretation of findings from question 14**

A. **Willingness to recommend South Africa to other Gabonese students**

Although studying in South Africa has issues, the study shows that the Gabonese international students would be willing to recommend South Africa as a study destination to prospective students. The reasons behind these findings were based on the quality of the

South African institutions, the reputation that those institutions have acquired within the continent and some at an international level. The availability of resources to students for them to graduate on time, the availability of courses, the affordable tuition fees compared to other countries, are also an attractive factor. Furthermore, the benefit of learning an additional language as well as the opportunity to reside in a city with a growing Gabonese student community like Cape Town could help students to feel less homesick. The feeling of homesickness could be reduced as students could familiarize themselves with an environment where they would be surrounded around other international students and the local population. The previous statement goes according to findings made by Mda (2010:11), who stipulated that students will feel at ease in their local environment when there is a high number of international students.

4.2.6.2 Question 15

Data reflected that 96% of participants (24) decided that they would be able to recommend South Africa as a leisure destination to fellow Gabonese citizens as, according to them the country presents multiple advantages. They stated that the country is well developed to compete with western nations, South Africa has a good range of fully functional infrastructures for an African county such as the Gautrain, international airports and multiple five-stars' hotels. Furthermore, the country has many historical, urban and natural sites to visit which is a plus when it comes to tourism. Administratively South Africa has waived visa application for Gabonese citizens who wish to visit the country for a stay not exceeding 30 days (DHA, 2018), which is an advantage to them as it encourages them to visit the country. The facts that coming to South Africa for touristic purpose is not as expensive as western countries and the country not being too far from Gabon were also stated. However, only 4% of participants (1) did not recommend South Africa as a leisure destination, this was "*because of safety*" issues, as stated by participant 20 (*Appendix G20*).

- **Interpretation of findings from question 15**

A. Willingness to recommend South Africa to other fellow Gabonese

Data showed that Gabonese international students would be willing to recommend South Africa as a leisure destination to fellow Gabonese citizens. This decision is based on the infrastructures that promote tourists' mobility such as free visa policies and accommodation facilities. Though such decisions seemed not to be linked to international student mobility, it is actually the case as students already in South Africa are more likely to promote the country to their relatives, as it could happen that they would need to travel for touristic purposes, personal reasons or even for graduation ceremonies. In those cases, students who are already living in South Africa could eventually provide accommodation for their

visitors. This factor would potentially exclude the need to pay for a hotel or private accommodation, which in return would convince them to travel to South Africa.

In the UK, £0.6bn was spent during the academic year 2015/16 by family and friends visiting international students over the duration of their studies (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013:15). It could, therefore, be assumed that having more international students would bring more visitors into the country, which would generate more revenue for the tourist sector and develop local economy. It, therefore, represents a benefit that South Africa could derive from international students, as those visitors will spend their money in the country instead of doing it somewhere else.

4.2.6.3 Question 16

Data showed that 96% of participants (24) stated that they were willing to remain or even relocate to South Africa after their studies for work purposes if they had the opportunity.

From the data it appeared that, compared to Gabon, South Africa has far better labour practices, therefore being hired would be based on qualifications, experience and skills. In this instance participant 4 (*Appendix G4*) affirmed that "*the country's institutions offer a good platform for labour dispute with an institution like the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA); a health package is usually included in the contracts; I can get more opportunities than in Gabon and better experience".* Participant 1 (*Appendix G1*) affirmed that "*I believe that I will have more and better opportunities here. I will have a job based on my competences and qualifications*". Having lived in South Africa for many years and understanding the South African market, policies, administration, it   has been found that South African society has been mentioned as well. For instance, participant 19 (*Appendix G9*) stated that "*after a decade spent here, South Africa has become a second home*". Participant 5 (*Appendix G5*) said that "*I already spent 6 years so far. I am used to this country and familiar with the society and culture*"; this indicates that students do not see themselves working elsewhere other than in South Africa.

Only participant 14 (*Appendix G14*) declared to be unwilling to relocate to or remain in South Africa even in case of a work opportunity, a decision based on entrepreneurial reasons. As the participant claimed, "*I think that there are more opportunities for me in Gabon as a future entrepreneur compared than in South Africa*".

- **Interpretation of findings from question 16**

A. Willingness to remain or relocate in South Africa

Data showed that, despite negative aspects faced on campus, in the South African society as well as by relatives that remained in the country of origin, Gabonese international students

are willing to relocate or remain in South Africa for work purposes. This finding seemed not to be particular to Gabonese international students, as Beine et al. (2014:41) also found that international students are likely to remain and work in the host country as they are an available source of skilled workers needed for the growth of the country. Therefore, the study highlighted that this decision was based on the facts that South Africa would offer better exposure and opportunity in terms of the international market, job accessibility, labour practice, skills acquisition, experience and potential growth.

Thus, Gabonese international students would constitute an available labour force already trained and accommodated to the South African labour market and society. Therefore, not retaining those students could be regarded as losing skilled individuals to another country.

Thus, judging from the changes in terms of regulation for critical skills and scarce skills permits for foreign nationals, it could be assumed that the South African authorities have understood the need to retain international student graduates. Although the retention of skilled students could be a disadvantage to the country of origin and is associated with 'brain drain', it would be a great acquisition for the host country and linked with 'brain gain'. Therefore, the researcher agrees with Tati (2010:283) citing Anthias (2007), who claimed that the decision of international students to remain in the host country should not only be regarded as 'brain drain' or 'brain gain' but as 'brain circulation' for the country of origin, which could see its development impacted.

4.3 Summary of findings from the interviews

During the semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (*Appendix A*), it was possible to understand the factors influencing Gabonese international students to further their tertiary education in South Africa that emerged.

Through the findings in paragraph 4.2.1, it was possible to have an overview of the type of institutions, the courses enrolled in as well as the duration of their stay within the country. The findings in paragraph 4.2.2 provided an understanding of the students' decision-making process in terms of their preferred institutions as referrals from relatives or/and friends, the possibility of learning English, financial aspects (and scholarship) and the opportunity to study in a higher education institution offering a quality education, were taken into consideration. From the findings in paragraph 4.2.2, it was therefore established that students' knowledge of South Africa was about its culture and society as well as its higher education institutions which have satisfactory tuition fees.

Therefore, once the students had chosen South Africa, a study visa was a prerequisite before entering the country and starting their studies. The findings in paragraph 4.2.3 showed that two different types of services were rendered. Applications submitted in Gabon

resulted in poor quality service and long waiting period compared to applications submitted in South Africa which had better quality service and a shorter waiting period. Furthermore, findings in paragraph 4.2.3 showed that in terms of application to the higher institutions of education, it was almost the same. As in the private institutions, applications were handled more professionally with an efficient online platform, and communication occurred with a student advisor, while public institutions seemed not to focus on those aspects.

The findings in paragraph 4.2.4 offered a comparative overview of the qualitative aspects of the education system in Gabon and South Africa. Students stressed that Gabon's quality of education is hampered by student unrests, lack of qualification and overcrowding of its institutions. While South Africa's quality of education is enhanced by fewer student unrests, better facilities, support for students, professional staff, internships, short courses and part-time classes. Through the interpretation of findings in paragraph 4.2.4.1, it was then possible to ascertain that the quality of education system in South Africa is better than the one in Gabon. However, this assertion would have been incomplete without mentioning the benefit added with learning English, as the findings in paragraph 4.2.4.3 of the study disclosed that it offered more opportunities to students in terms of employability, business and academic research.

Although findings in paragraph 4.2.4 revealed that South Africa has advantages, findings in paragraph 4.2.5 showed that on campus, Gabonese international students had difficulties in terms of academic writing, learning abilities, unpleasant comments, racial grouping and internship unfairness. Findings in paragraph 4.2.5 revealed that other challenges took place within the South African society in terms of the use of local dialect, social grouping as well as physical and verbal abuse.

Except for the academic and social challenges encountered by students, the study in paragraph 4.2.5.3 indicated that a more structural challenge happened in the sense of accommodation. Although some students were financially able to pay for some places and high prices through relatives, private accommodation and their own incomes, accommodation still represented a problem as issues related to proof of income, cost, yearly increase and discrimination arose.

Another matter that seemed to be a challenge was the issue of safety in South Africa for foreign nationals; however as explained in paragraph 4.2.5.4, findings indicated that this safety issues did not affect the students' decision to choose South Africa as their host nation. The findings in paragraph 4.2.6 allowed the researcher to establish that South Africa would benefit from international student mobility. As the findings in paragraph 4.2.6.1 showed, students were willing to recommend South Africa as a study destination to other Gabonese students as well as to recommend South Africa as a leisure destination to fellow Gabonese

and to relocate (or remain in South Africa) for work purposes as revealed in paragraph 4.2.6.2.

4.4 List of main findings

The subsections below present the main findings that emerged.

4.4.1 Main finding 1

The preference in courses studied (management, business, engineering and technology) as stipulated in paragraph 4.2.1.1, is the main finding for question 1. Through *Appendix C* and Table 4.1 it was possible to establish a pattern of choice for all international students who took part of this study.

4.4.2 Main finding 2

Paragraph 4.2.2.1 revealed that all students were in one way or another assisted by either relatives or friends to make their decision regarding the choice of the host nation. The opportunity of learning an additional language also appeared to be an important factor borne in mind by all students as it appeared through the findings in paragraph 4.2.2.1.

4.4.3 Main finding 3

Paragraph 4.2.2.2 revealed that cultural and societal knowledge were the basis of the knowledge students had about South Africa. In the same paragraph, findings revealed that although negative aspects of the South African society were known to students, they still decided to choose South Africa as their host nation.

4.4.4 Main finding 4

The tuition fees paid by Gabonese students, as revealed by the findings in paragraph 4.2.2.3, appeared to be satisfactory for them. The findings revealed that, although different from SADC students, students understood the need to pay slightly more; however, it was still less than what they could have paid in an institution of higher education in the UK or USA.

4.4.5 Main finding 5

Paragraph 4.2.3.1 showed discrepancies in visa application processes as applications in Gabon and South Africa were not handled similarly. It appeared that in South Africa the application process was handled in a more professional manner than in Gabon. This situation seemed to have caused different issues acting as constraining factors while applying in Gabon.

4.4.6 Main finding 6

Differences were noticed between private and public institutions as findings in paragraph 4.2.3.2 revealed that application processes were more difficult in public institutions. However, more assistance was provided in private institutions through the help of student advisors, while in public institutions students had to seek information by themselves.

4.4.7 Main finding 7

In paragraph 4.2.4.1, findings showed that, compared to South Africa, the Gabonese quality of education was of poor quality. Gabonese higher education institutions were constantly subjected to student unrests, lack of qualification and overcrowded capacities.

4.4.8 Main finding 8

In paragraph 4.2.4.2, the study revealed that South African higher education institutions had almost no student unrests, they have good facilities with professional staff and offering short courses and part time classes. Overall the findings showed that the South African higher education institutions were of a good quality and provided a good environment to students which therefore constitute an advantage.

4.4.9 Main finding 9

It appeared that learning English was a possibility to improve chances of employability, as findings in paragraph 4.2.4.3 showed that students regarded the ability to speak English as a competitive advantage on the work market. Paragraph 4.2.4.3 also revealed that speaking English helped the students to have access to more study material and consult additional sources (other than those in French) when it comes to academic work.

4.4.10 Main finding 10

After the completion of their period of English learning, the ability to write and speak English correctly was not totally acquired, as revealed by the findings in paragraph 4.2.5.1. This situation appeared to be a disadvantage as the findings showed that after the completion of the school of language course, their inability to speak English hampered their learning process and subjected them to mocking. Findings in paragraph 4.2.5.1 revealed that local students would split into groups based on their races when seated in class. This race based grouping saw international students creating their own group. The findings also demonstrated that this situation made international students feel unwelcome.

4.4.11 Main finding 11

Use of local dialect, as revealed in paragraph 4.2.5.2 appeared to be a challenge for students as findings in the same paragraph showed that it established a language barrier between local population and foreign students. Through findings in paragraph 4.2.5.2, the study revealed that physical and verbal abuses took place and constituted another challenge. As this situation occurred, students decided to minimize their interactions with the local population including their fellow classmates.

1.4.12 Main finding 12

Paragraph 4.2.5.3 showed that students have issues regarding accommodation as they were subjected to unfair rental practices from owners and agencies. Difficulties to cover sufficient funds, high rents and yearly increase were among the challenges encountered by students.

4.2.1   Main finding 13

Findings in paragraph 4.2.5.4 demonstrated that safety issues did not change the choice of Gabonese international students. Moreover, as revealed in paragraph 4.2.2, they were aware of the societal and cultural factors regarding South Africa, but they still chose South Africa as their host nation, which is another revealing factor that safety issues were not a deterring factor.

4.4.14 Main finding 14

Paragraph 4.2.6.1 revealed that despite the challenges stated in paragraph 4.2.5 in section E of the questionnaire (*Appendix A*), the students would still be willing to recommend South Africa to other Gabonese students as a study destination.

4.4.15 Main finding 15

Paragraph 4.2.6.2 showed that participants were willing to recommend South Africa to other fellow Gabonese as a leisure destination as South Africa has a visa free policy for Gabonese citizens, good infrastructures and affordable prices.

4.4.16 Main finding 16

Paragraph 4.2.6.3 showed that participants would be willing to remain and even relocate in South Africa for work purpose. The findings demonstrated that this decision could be beneficial for South Africa as students would constitute an available labour force already trained and accommodated to the South African society.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented, discussed and compared the results according to the body of literature, in a manner that provides comprehensive knowledge aimed at explaining the factors influencing Gabonese international students to further their tertiary education in South Africa. Qualitative data analysis was used to capture, decode and interpret the thoughts of the students during the face-to-face interview. In the following chapter, a conclusion of the study will be provided as well as recommendations for the different stakeholders and future study.

CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explain the factors influencing international to further their tertiary education in South Africa (as indicated in paragraph 1.4), with particular attention to Gabonese students studying in Cape Town. The study was conducted to answer the main and secondary questions formulated in paragraph 1.5. This chapter will provide conclusions and recommendations.

5.2 Discussion of research questions

Collectively, the main research question is answered by the secondary research questions formulated in paragraph 1.5. The following section is a discussion of the secondary research questions based on the findings in paragraph 4.2 of the semi-structured interviews (*Appendix A*) and the main findings formulated in paragraph 4.4.

5.2.1 Secondary research question I: What motivates Gabonese students to choose South Africa as their host nation for tertiary education?

From the interpretation of findings formulated in paragraph 4.2.1.1, it has been established that Gabonese students took into consideration various factors before choosing South Africa. Among them the preference in courses studied (as stipulated in the list of main findings in paragraph 4.4.1) is one of the constituents of the decision making-process. The interpretation of findings stipulated in paragraph 4.2.2.1 indicated that the inner family circle made up of friends and direct family members who had studied or travelled in South Africa also played a role in helping with their choice. Those people usually assisted the students by elaborating on factors such as the cost of living and the quality of education. From paragraph 4.2.2.1 it transpired that the prospect of learning English was another factor influencing their decision, as acquiring an additional language would increase their chances of business and academic success. The interpretation of findings formulated in paragraph 4.2.2.2 revealed that cultural and societal factors were taken into consideration. As students knew about South Africa through TV shows, political and academic personalities, all portraying positive aspects of the South African society and culture as opposed to the negative aspects represented by abuses on foreign nationals, for instance. Studying in a foreign country is something that could be costly for any prospective student. However, interpretation of findings formulated in paragraph 4.2.2.3 showed that students regarded South African tuition fees as satisfactory compared to what they could have paid in the UK or USA. Regarding applications for a student visa, interpretation of findings in paragraph 4.2.3.1 indicated that students were not satisfied with the process of issuing of their visas when the application is made in Gabon.

However, when the application is made in South Africa, findings showed that VFS facilitated a speedy handling of the visa applications. In paragraph 4.2.3.2, it was indicated that the application process in the higher education institutions were slightly different, depending on the type of institutions students were attending. Furthermore, in paragraph 4.2.3.2, it was shown that applications at PHEI were easier as student advisors were available, compared to public higher education institutions where application process seemed to be more complicated.

5.2.2 Secondary research question II: What are the advantages for Gabonese students to study in South Africa?

Deciding to study abroad must be motivated by certain factors that are beneficial to the students. Paragraph 4.2.4 showed the findings related to the advantages for Gabonese students to study in South Africa. Among those advantages, interpretation of the findings in paragraph 4.2.4.1 showed that student unrests, lack of qualification and overcrowded capacities were among the difficulties that hampered the Gabonese' higher education institutions compared to their South African counterparts.

Although there were challenges, advantages of studying in South Africa were on a more important scale. Paragraph 4.2.4.2 showed that amongst them were the fact that South Africa have fewer student unrests; South African higher education institutions employ professional lecturing stuff; there is no lack in qualifications offered; study conditions allow the students to complete their studies without any difficulties.

South Africa as a study destination requires students to study in English. In paragraph 4.2.4.3, it was revealed that learning an additional language appeared to be an advantage for the students. Their proficiency in English allowed students to have access to a wide range of study material and opportunity. In the same paragraph, findings revealed that learning in English while being in South Africa is not only advantageous while studying but also once the studies are over, mastering English is believed to increase employability opportunities for anyone who would undertake an international career.

5.2.3 Secondary research question III: What are the challenges for Gabonese students in South Africa?

Although the decision to study in South Africa was thoroughly considerate, the final choice is nevertheless not an easy one, therefore paragraph 4.2.5 stressed that some challenges are linked to this choice. The interpretation of the findings in paragraph 4.2.5.1 showed that among the challenges that emerged, academic writing seemed to prevail. Learning the basis of the English vocabulary seemed sometimes not enough when immersed in the academic

world. The findings showed that students also had difficulties as their ability to participate in class and comprehend their courses were heavily affected. Furthermore, in paragraph 4.2.5.1, challenges occurred when students' separations took place in classrooms. Gabonese students would get to associate themselves with local students only during some group projects as it became clear that the local students did not want to work with or befriend them.

Interpretation of findings in paragraph 4.2.5.2 showed that students were also confronted by social challenges while trying to interact with the local population, especially those who did not always speak English. Dialects spoken in South Africa are often not understood by students, so this language barrier created miscommunication, that would cause social grouping, reinforcing the idea for students to not associate themselves with local population. This subsequently laid the ground for verbal and even physical abuses when confronted to them.

Interpretation of findings in paragraph 4.2.5.3 demonstrated another challenge as finding student accommodation represented an issue for students. With difficulties such as owners/agencies not wanting to rent to foreign nationals, students and even black people, accommodation appeared to be a real problem, especially for those who did not necessarily have the financial means to afford high prices.

Safety issues were perceived to be part of the challenges for Gabonese students; however, from the interpretation of the findings in paragraph 4.2.5.4, it appeared that students were not concerned by safety issues when deciding to study in South Africa. Nevertheless, It transpired that choosing Cape Town among all cities in South Africa was a decision based on the fact that this city was deemed "*safer*" than cities like Johannesburg or Pretoria, for instance.

5.2.4 Secondary research question IV: What are the benefits of international students in South Africa?

The influx of international students in South Africa should also be regarded through the prism of the benefits it could bring to the country. With the internationalization of education, higher education institutions also regard students as customers, therefore it implies that students should pay for the services they seek when deciding to come to South Africa. Thus, the financial aspect represents a major benefit as those students spend money for their travel expenses from their country to South Africa (and vice versa); to commute from their house to school; to cover their tuition fees; to pay for their accommodation; for their medical aid; for their groceries; entertainment, and so forth. However, except for the expenses directly related to the students, the study findings showed that the presence of international students

in South Africa represents a broader benefit. As the interpretation of the findings in paragraph 4.2.6.1 showed that current students stated that they would be willing to recommend South Africa to fellow Gabonese students. This means that potential new students with the above-mentioned spending would probably decide to study in South Africa. Interpretation of findings in paragraph 4.2.6.2 revealed that students' families and friends also represent a beneficial factor related to international students. Their decisions to visit South Africa would probably be motivated by one of them living in the country and therefore lead to some of the spending abovementioned.

Furthermore, despite the challenges encountered at an academic and social level, from the interpretation of the findings in paragraph 4.2.6.3, it appeared that the students are willing to remain and even relocate to South Africa. Therefore, this factor represents an opportunity for the country to strengthen sectors lacking certain skills as the availability of graduate students would fill the gap and allow a transfer of knowledge.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the interpretation of the findings and the list of main findings in Chapter four, the following recommendations were formulated and are aimed at the different stakeholders concerned about (Gabonese) international students furthering their tertiary education in South Africa.

5.3.1 Recommendation 1: To create awareness among students

5.3.1.1 Inform and educate students via the Gabonese students' society in Cape Town

This structure seems to only be a platform for Gabonese students in Cape Town to host cultural activities that would gather students from different areas of the city of Cape Town. As well as providing information or advices for prospective students unsure about the choice of their future higher institution of education as revealed in paragraph 4.2.3.2. However, as reported in paragraph 4.2.5.1, Gabonese students have difficulties to interact socially with their classmates and the local population.

Therefore, instead of only providing a Gabonese social network that helps with the feeling of homesickness (paragraph 4.2.6.1), minimizes abuses (paragraph 4.2.5.2) but yet stops them from discovering more about South Africa. The Gabonese students' society in Cape Town should play a more positive role by helping them to overcome those difficulties. Hence, it would be recommended that Gabonese students' society in Cape Town start promoting activities that would expose newly arrived students to the South African society in a different view than the one portraying foreign nationals as victims of abuse. Those activities should promote communication and understanding with the local population. This would not only

help new students with fitting into the South African society but educate the local population about where they come from and the purpose of their temporarily stay in South Africa. For instance, these could be activities such as visits to certain disadvantaged communities around Cape Town, visits of orphanages, hosting events with open doors on and outside campuses and so forth.

5.3.2 Recommendation 2: To advise higher institutions of education in South Africa

5.3.2.1 International office branches for higher institutions of education

Although all higher institutions of education are accessible to Gabonese international students in Cape Town, it was indicated in paragraph 4.2.3.2 that in public institutions students' choices were made with the help of relatives or alumni while in private institutions students were assisted by student advisors.

However, to compete with other hubs of international student mobility, South Africa needs to have proper means to attract international students from the country of origin. Therefore, it could be recommended that those higher institutions of education open international offices in the country of origin. This would help students to gather information about the different programmes and courses offered while being in their home country. They would not only rely on advices from relative or alumni as also reported in paragraph 4.2.2.1 but from personnel working for those institutions giving accurate information.

5.3.2.2 School of English at higher institutions of education

As reported in paragraph 4.2.2.1, learning English does not represent an obstacle to the influx of Gabonese international students in South Africa. In paragraph 4.2.5.1, it was, however, established that they faced difficulties like poor academic writing. Therefore, it could be recommended for higher education institutions to open their own schools of English. This would ensure that students would be studying English in the very same institution where they would be doing their first year. Other than familiarizing themselves with their new student environment, it would ensure a good level of English proficiency. The current institutions providing English classes are mostly owned by private individuals and do not necessarily match the level of professionalism offered in public and (bigger) private institutions.

5.3.2.3 Websites and social media platforms for higher institutions of education

At the time of the fourth industrial revolution, digital technologies are an integral part of today's world. Hence, to compete equally with other countries like the USA, UK, France or Germany, South African higher institutions of education must ensure that their websites and

social media platforms are up to date. As was exposed in paragraph 4.2.3.2 that, students encountered difficulties to find information on campus as well as on the institution's website.

Therefore, better websites should be designed, social media platforms should be implemented as few institutions could argue to have Instagram, Skype, Wechat, WhatsApp or instant messaging forum pages as only Facebook seems to be the main social media platform available. This would help higher education institutions to market themselves widely and ensure that more (prospective) students have instant access to information.

5.3.2.4 Websites in foreign language for higher institutions of education

As stipulated in paragraph 4.2.2, Gabonese international students relied on information provided by relatives and alumni. However, as revealed in paragraph 4.2.2.2, prospective students did not yet speak English while applying for visas in their home country. However, if South African higher education institutions intend to increase their shares in international student mobility, it would be advisable for them to be able to provide information in a langue other than English. Knowing that not all international students come from English-speaking countries, this would enable prospective students to gather information by simply going on the website of those institutions while being in their country of origin.

5.3.2.5 Website gathering all accredited South African higher institutions of education

In paragraph 4.2.4.2, the study revealed that the variety of courses offered is regarded as a quality of the South African higher education institutions. It would be even better if South African higher institutions could launch a website where all higher institutions of education could showcase the different courses they offer. This recommendation could be in the idea of what is already done by the Republic of France with the website campus.france.org. This initiative would give the opportunity for prospective students to get advices.

Moreover, it would help coordinating all answers to be given to international students interested in studying in South Africa, as this website would be used as an online database, gathering information about students' visas, registrations, schools of language, basic information about the country, tuition fees, courses offered, and so forth. Developing such a website would again allow prospective students to have accurate information for their future course choices while being in the country of origin, instead of doing so just for the school of language, as it is currently the case.

5.3.2.6 Students' advisors at all types of higher institutions of education

In paragraph 4.2.3.2, the study showed that student advisors were only available in private institutions. Therefore, it would be recommended that all types of institutions should have an appropriate number of student advisors on their campuses. This would enable students to

communicate directly with an officer that would assist them with all information necessary to make relevant choices when it comes to their studies.

5.3.3 Recommendation 3: To notify the Department of Higher Education

5.3.3.1 Scholarships for outstanding international students

Currently some scholarships are available for international students; however, as is the case with the National Research Foundation (NRF) Honours and Btech, scholarships are not available for international students; only Master's and Doctoral scholarships are, but yet restricted by a pre-determined quota for foreign nationals (National Research Foundation, 2019). Nonetheless, financial constraints affect students irrespective of their origins. This is also reflected in paragraph 4.2.2.1, which showed that financial factors were related to affordability of higher institutions of education and the cost of living. Therefore, if scholarships were to be granted to international students based on their outstanding academic results or the types of courses, this would ensure a better attractivity for the South African destination.

5.3.3.2 International campus branches

For the South African higher institutions of education to secure more international students, it could be recommended that the Department of Higher Education develops a strategy that would allow the opening of South African campus branches directly in the country of origin. This would spare prospective students a complicated administrative process for their visas, as revealed in paragraph 4.2.3.1. However, once the undergraduate programme is completed, students would probably decide to complete the postgraduate programme in South Africa as they would have been familiar with the South African higher education system. The implementation of this recommendation would also intensify the competition in a country like France or the USA, for instance, which have already opened campuses in Gabon.

5.3.4 Recommendation 4: To alert the Republic of South Africa

5.3.4.1 Accommodation

Although accommodation costs follow the fluctuation of the market, students represent the vulnerable role of customers, as presented in paragraph 4.2.5.3, hence they are subjected to abuse. To prevent that, it would be recommended that the Republic of South Africa implements laws:
- That would ensure that prices remain relatively low for any students that seek private accommodation;

- That take harsh action against any owner/agency discriminating against applicants based on their nationality or race;
- That under certain conditions allow international students to apply for student loans. Although they can afford some forms of accommodation, the first month represents an instalment that is usually difficult to afford since it includes the deposit as well.

5.3.4.2 Visas

Since issues with the application procedures were mentioned in paragraph 4.2.3, the Republic of South Africa needs to ensure that all information regarding the issuing of study visas is available and clear for everyone in their embassies. Therefore, since the application for the first issue of a student visa is always made in the country of origin, it should be recommended that:

- Students deal directly with South African officers that are aware of all documents and procedures. This would avoid situations whereby, information provided varies from one officer to another, causing unnecessary delays and misunderstandings;
- Information for student visas should also be available in the home language as those students and most of their siblings assisting them do not necessarily speak English;

5.3.5 Recommendation 5: To sensitize the Republic of Gabon

Paragraph 4.2.3 showed that the application processes for the visas and for the higher education of institutions were not always a smooth process. Nevertheless, Gabonese students would be willing to recommend South Africa to fellow students and citizens as showed in paragraph 4.2.6. Therefore, it would be recommendable for the Republic of Gabon and its Department of Higher Education to establish political and educational ties to increase partnership schemes and mobility strategy plans with its counterpart of the Republic of South Africa. Since the influence of Western countries as hubs of international student mobility has decreased to the benefit of regional hubs like South Africa, this co-operation would promote the South African destination to future students through activities such as expo events, marketing campaigns or open days in various regions of Gabon as well as ensuring a smooth and well-prepared application process.

5.3.6 Recommendation for further study

In recent years, international student mobility has increased, influenced by factors such as cost of living, cost of education, availability of certain courses, distance from home, language, and so forth. However, the countries where international students decided to go have also changed. As demonstrated in this study, South Africa has a major role to play in Africa, but studies were mostly focused on 'contact' higher education of institutions. However, with the advent of the fourth industrial revolution, it is now possible to pursue

higher education from a distance learning institution. Therefore, further studies could include those types of institutions as they may also have a growing number of international students enrolled. It would contribute to the body of knowledge to understand and compare the factors influencing students' decision to further their tertiary education in such type of institution in South Africa.

5.4 Conclusion

The internationalization of higher education in the past few years has been subjected to different patterns, which contributed to the emergence of new hubs of international student mobility. Those new hubs include countries in the Middle East as well as Africa, with South Africa as one of the leading actors within the continent. To the researcher's knowledge, no study has yet focused on the Gabonese students' destination choice to South Africa. Thus, this study was undertaken to explain the factors influencing international students to further their tertiary education in South Africa, with the focus on Gabonese students in Cape Town.

The study showed that students had to face numerous challenges starting from the application in the country of origin up to their classrooms and daily life. However, despite those challenges, there were more advantages to be taken into considerations. Those advantages therefore seemed to be more beneficial to students compared to what they would have endured if the decision to pursue their studies in some historical student mobility's hubs was taken. Furthermore, the South African tertiary education system is of good quality and trusted as students would go as far as completing their master's and PhD studies as well being willing to recommend South Africa as a study destination.

Through this study, it has been established why South Africa can be regarded as a stronghold of international student mobility, capable of challenging countries of the western world. It also gave an understanding of the factors influencing international students to choose South Africa to pursue their tertiary education.

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