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DR. G. YOGANANDAN
ASST. PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF MBA
K.S.R COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCE (AUTONOMOUS)
TIRUCHENGODE

ABSTRACT

In this research, the researcher has used qualitative research technique to understand the problems faced by the African students in India particularly in Tamil Nadu state (province) of India. For this purpose, the researcher has used in-depth interview methods and interview 40 African students are pursuing their collegiate education in Namakkal district of Tamil Nadu, India. The research was conducted during August 2013 to December 2013, for a period of five months. The study found that the major challenges are the cultural adjustment challenge especially during the initial days, availability of home country food, non-availability of part-time jobs and communication barrier.

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African students, International students, Cultural adjustment, Challenges, Problems, Education in India.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a multi-cultural country which cherishes the diversity that is brought by the multi-cultural community. Indians, in general, are tolerant and treat the visitors (guest) as if they have received the god. The international students add to this cultural diversity of India. Since 2000, Indian universities and colleges have been attracting good number of foreign students for their collegiate education especially for their higher education and most of the international students are from African countries. Even though the African students come with a perception and understanding of India and Indian culture, they face serious cultural challenges during the initial transition period. The African students feel a cultural shock and which results in stress, anxiety, powerless and loneliness. International students indicate a stronger preference for making friends from the same country or students from other nations over students from the host county (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2003). The international students prefer preparing their own food during their initial transition period than trying the Indian food varieties. And, also the African students in India prefer to have their own transport arrangement between the places of residence and the educational institution. It should be noted that the dress and other accessories they wear reflect the culture they bring in. Some time student absenteeism, classroom disturbance, dress code violation and skipping class behaviors had very high negative correlation with teachers' expectations for student achievement (Gu, Lai, & Ye, 2011). Nasir (2012) argued that the Cultural adjustment had significant predictive value for academic achievement of foreign students and students in the initial year face more challenges in adjusting to the local culture. Nayak & Venkatraman (2010) in their research highlighted that the students found it difficult to overcome the change in academic culture (academic expectations) and any academic failures in the first semester (from their arrival) resulted in a series of failures. A lot can add to culture shock, the extent to which an individual "feel fit in" the community, the sense of belonging, personal interactions, friends, as well as positive and negative treatment by the host community or country at large (Akinola, 2014). Cultural factors affect international student loneliness in two distinct ways. First, many students find themselves missing their own cultural and linguistic setting, often intensely and cross-cultural relationships (Sawir et al., 2007).

2. METHODOLOGY

In this research, an attempt has been made to find out the challenges faced by the African students in Tamil Nadu, India. This study was guided by the qualitative researches conducted in this area by eminent researchers like Gebhard (2012), Nasir (2012) and Talebloo & Baki (2013). The researcher has used qualitative research technique to understand the problems faced by the African students in India particularly in Tamil Nadu state (province) of India. A detailed questionnaire was prepared and the data were collected through interview method from a sample (size) of 40 African students who are currently pursuing their collegiate education in Namakkal district of Tamil Nadu, India. Though, the research tried to meet more than 100 students who are studying (exact number of students in Namakkal district is not available) in Namakkal district of Tamil Nadu, many of the students are not interested in giving an interview. The study was carried out during August 2013 to December 2013, for a period of five months.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 PART I: PROFILE AND LIFE OF THE AFRICAN STUDENTS IN TAMIL NADU

The demographic profile of the African students in the chosen sample is described in this section.

3.1.1 NATIONALITY, AGE GROUP, GENDER, RELIGION AND MARITAL STATUS

Out of the 40 African students interviewed by the researcher 36 students are from Kenya and 2 students from Uganda and 1 student each from Mozambique and Tanzania. It is learned that majority of the African students are from Kenya and most of them replied that they have come to India for their study as many of their seniors are studying in India. So, this word-of-mouth communication is acting as a powerful promotional tool for education sector in India. The very young African student in the sample is aged 18 and the very senior student is aged 27. Majority of the students are 23 years old and the average age of these students stand at 23.47 years. This is a little higher than the normal age group of Indian students in the collegiate education in India. There are seven female students in the sample and the remaining 33 students are male students. All the students in the sample follow Christianity. There are three married students in the sample consisting of 2 female and 1 male students.

3.1.2 COURSE OF STUDY, LIVING EXPENSES AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

In the selected sample, 9 students are pursuing post-graduation in which 4 students are doing their MBA and the remaining students are pursuing their post graduation in either microbiology or computer science. Among the remaining 31 students who are pursuing their under graduation equal number of students have studying commerce, business administration, computer science bio-chemistry and microbiology. The individual student's previous academic qualifications could become a challenge if it is not in tune with course requirements and the support provided (Andersson, 2008). It is inferred that India has emerged as the major education centre for African students for their under-graduation and slowly more and more African students started accepting India as the destination for their higher education and they are yet to decide continuing their research studies in India. Majority of the African students are financially dependent on their parents for paying their education and other expenses in India, i.e their parents are sponsoring their studies interestingly one female student said that her expenses were paid by her husband and another student told the researcher that replied that his grandmother is taking care of his expenses. One student answered that his expenses are taken care of his uncle and another student replied that his relative is sponsoring his education related expenses in India which when he reaches home need be settled on a priority basis. This shows that around ten percent of students study with the help of financial support extended by

other than parents. The African Students on an average spend Rs.2400 (51%) for food expense, Rs. 1000 (21%) for house rent, Rs.600 (13%) for travel, Rs.500 (11%) for entertainment and Rs.200 (4%) for education related (purchase of stationery, study material/ books etc.,) expenses besides that tuition fee which depends on the course (subject of study) and also varies with institution.

3.1.3 REASONS FOR CHOOSING INDIA AND CAREER GOAL

The following are the reasons for choosing India to pursue their studies by the African students.

1. The duration of courses or period of study is more in African countries.
2. The cost of education is high in their country.
3. The availability of seats is very much limited and therefore, is very difficult to get seats.
4. The availability of preferred course (subject) is also either limited or not at all available.
5. In order to get exposure and desire to pursue their studies in other countries also motivated many students to come to India.

Had it not been India, majority of the African students have replied that their next choice would have been USA, Australia, UK, or Singapore. Some students replied that their alternative destination would have been France, Germany, Norway or Canada. The researcher observes that the students have chosen India mainly because of the cost of education in those above mentioned countries are many times more than India. So, Indian educational institutions need to understand that in order to attract foreign students they have to keep on providing quality education at very internationally competitive cost/price. Majority of the students opined that Oxford university, Cambridge university and Harvard university as the best institutions or universities in the world. So, in other words, the image of Indian educational institutions is not that of a very prestigious or premium institution but of a value for money educational institutions.

Majority of the African students want gainful employment in the industrial sector. Among the 40 African students in the sample, 7 students want to have a career in the research and 3 students replied that they are seriously interested in becoming an eminent entrepreneur in their country with a noble thought of contributing to the nation in the form of employment creation, income generation and serving the society through quality products and services. Majority of the African students want to return back to their respective countries to start their career but around ten percent of students wish to continue in India provided they are given matching job opportunities. It proves that many students may have a positive frame of mind about India and Indian social environment and feel that India is a home away from home.

PART- II CHALLENGES FACED BY THE AFRICAN STUDENTS IN TAMIL NADU

3.2.1 PERCEPTION OF AFRICAN STUDENTS ABOUT THEIR FELLOW INDIAN STUDENTS AND CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT CHALLENGES

The African students feel that the local students (students of southern Indian region) are friendly in nature, honest, helpful and have good subject knowledge. The African students feel that some students from the local area do not have adequate exposure and do not possess required communication skill. The African students opine that the North Indian students have good subject knowledge, good exposure, friendly and communicative but on the contrary they are little lazy in their approach to studies. The researches show that international students were more engaged in educationally purposeful activities than host country students, especially during the first year of college (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2003). African students feel Indian culture is the most significant challenge they face in India, in a ten point scale (Zero indicates no barrier and Ten indicates perfect barrier) African students have given an average score of 7.72 indicating culture as the biggest challenge or barrier for African students in India. The researcher observes that the students after coming into India, experience a cultural shock for the initial period (roughly two to three months) before getting adjusted to the new cultural environment. Some students expressed their desire to take part in the local festivals as they are curious of knowing the local festivals and expect the host country students to invite them but which is not happening. This finding matches with many past researches. Talebloo & Baki (2013) have found that the students have also faced social environment challenges which in turn are categorized into two main groups: cultural difficulties, English difficulties and communication problems. Gebhard (2012) stressed that although certainly international student needs to make efforts to adjust, it is not right to place all the responsibility for cultural adjustment on the international student. Identifying the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional strategies these students utilize in adjusting to a new culture in a positive way will provide college counsellors and personnel with a better overall understanding of the students they serve (Olivas & Li). The African students are finding it difficult to get the food of their choice but some students are told the researcher that they are happy as it offers them an opportunity to try (new) Indian food items. Some students prefer to prepare on their own particularly for breakfast and supper. Few African students opined that the variety of alcoholic beverages availability is creating little discomfort for the foreign students. The dress code of students in India varies from institution to institution. The educational institutions have uniform (dress code) for students till school level (12th standard) but they do not normally insist when they come to collegiate education. It should be worth noting that the African students prefer to wear the dresses (ethnic wear) that showcase their culture and identity. They believe it is a way of expressing and also enjoying the freedom. But, they feel that the host country nationals and students are not supportive of their dressing.

3.2.2 COMMUNICATION BARRIER

The research is of the opinion that the communication is not just only a medium of passing information but it is also a facility to share or express feelings. Many African students told the researcher that there is a communication gap like cultural gap that exists between the native or host country students and foreign students. Though the medium of instruction is English at the college level, the host country students prefer to communicate with their fellow host country students in their mother tongue. Most of the host country students do not normally initiate a discussion in English as they have used to speaking only in their (local) language for matters related to current affairs and many students even though good in English believe that it is only for their study related matters and not for general discussion. The researcher observes that some of the junior level teachers interact with the host country students in their local language which is not well taken by the African students. The language barriers have created a barrier to building friendships with local nationals and host country students (Kuo, 2011).

3.2.3 JOB OPPORTUNITY –RELUCTANCE TO TAKE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The job opportunities are plenty in India as it is one of the fast growing economies in the world. Yet the employers are reluctant to provide job opportunities to students. African students feel that a part-time job will be handy in handling their expenses in India and also it is a way the locals can recognise them. The researcher observes that India could see multi-fold increase in foreign students' arrival if they get part-time jobs easily. The foreign students also find it little difficult to get project and internship in regional or local companies.

4. SUGGESTIONS

The researcher would like to make three important suggestions to the government and also to the civil society in India.

1. The local industries need to consider giving project, internship and job opportunities to African students on a priority basis as they are talented and willing to take part in the value creation and value delivery of industries. They are adaptive and fast learners, so an opportunity would bring out the real skills of these students. The companies need to think the right job (place) to put these foreign nationals.
2. The host country citizens need to come forward to understand the culture of African students. The locals need to invite the foreign students to take part in the local festivals which will bridge the cultural gap and create a very comfortable environment both for the locals and the foreign students.
3. The Indian educational institutions need to improve the quality of their educational service. Now, African students prefer India for its cost advantage as they hold the image "value for money" for Indian education. In the future, the cost advantage may become a less influencing factor in the choice of destination. The Indian educational institutions need to modernise, come out of the traditional clutches that imbibe imparting quality education to the students, for example monotonous class room lectures without an application orientation.
4. The government or NGOs may conduct orientation classes for incoming African students in India. The NGOs or passed out senior students in concerned African countries can start orientation classes for the new outgoing (to India) students.

5. CONCLUSION

The study aimed at finding out the African students' life in Tamil Nadu, India focusing on the reasons for choosing India (especially Tamil Nadu, the southern-most part of India, a province India). The study was carried out during August 2013 to December 2013, for a period of five months. The study was conducted through the interview method. The research is a qualitative research does not focus on numbers but on the issues. For this purpose the researcher interviewed 40 African students who pursued their collegiate education in Namakkal district of Tamil Nadu, India during the research period. The research found that even though many African students feel like a home away from home, there are areas of weaknesses. They students are comfortable with natural climate but not the cultural climate. They feel that Indian students are less communicative in English. Many Africans come to India with clearly set goals like after completing their education they want to go back to their native places for starting their career. The author would like to suggest to Indians and Indian students to be more accommodative of the expectations of African students.

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