

Intra-African migration of students: an indirect approach to assessing the feasibility of reaping the potential economic gains of the demographic dividend in an era of higher education internationalisation and growing inequality

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Extended abstract

Education and labour policies are regarded as major instruments in harnessing the demographic dividend in Africa. Yet the rising international migration for study among young people within Africa is one of the telling indications that these two instruments are still to materialise in outcomes. Student migration is in itself a subject of study within the broad field of spatial mobility. From the point of view of reaping the benefits of the demographic dividend, it can indirectly reveal many facets of deficits in the educational and labour market systems of a country. Conceptually, this type of migration can take different forms and be driven by various motivations: to further study started in the country of origin; to obtain, as personal training project, a foreign degree; to avoid “barriers to entry” for a particular professional trajectory, to mention a few. Within the European context, especially the EU, the migration of students is conveyed through particular intergovernmental or bilateral programmes established to facilitate the mobility of students within what is generally called “students exchange programmes”: the Erasmus programme being one of these international exchange programmes. European students too move to other countries to undertake part or whole of their educational training.

While this migration originates from a wide range of countries, only a very small number of countries in Africa emerge as major destinations of these educational migrants. Making use of the empirical evidence available, the purpose of this paper is to examine, using a market segmentation approach, the driving forces and patterns of the migration of students in recent times. South Africa, Senegal and Morocco are countries of particular interest in this paper as far as major destination is concerned. A set of prominent determinants has been identified to be prominently influential at both macro and micro-levels in the generation of youth migration. In considerable numbers, African students from diverse geographical origins and educational levels migrate to these countries for study and improve their prospects for employment. Little is known however on the diversity of structural and individual drivers behind this migration from the angle of how they make decision on where to move; which university to choose and whether to stay, return home or go elsewhere after study.

The sources of information used in this paper are varied and these include international education statistics, localised surveys and grey literature. The main findings reported in the paper highlight two groups of prominent determinants. From the sending areas, the determinants at play at the macro-level relate to the growing inequality, the declining absorption capacity of the higher education system, the poor prospects for employment and the increased barriers to enter the North for study. With respect to destination, the paper has identified such determinants as the image of the country, the policy toward international African students, the quality of tertiary education, recruitment strategies and the social climate. Personal profile of students (demographics, academic ability, wealth, aspirations) mediates at varying degree the influence of these macro-level determinants. From a conceptualisation point of view, the paper concludes with a prediction that as this migration is likely to amplify in future

(because of the demographic momentum), gaining deeper understanding of how student migrants differ in profile and behaviour is especially important in a higher education internationalisation era that has come to be defined by profound changes in the way students make decisions around their migration.

Looking at the particular situation of South Africa and Morocco, data provide strong indications that these two countries do not only attract migrants from all over the industrialised world, it is also an important destination for students from a diversity of other countries on the continent. It can be argued that factors that drive this migration are quite numerous of which good educational infrastructure and prospects for finding work after study count with a heavy weight. Being in the early stage of working age for most of them and belonging to a demographic group strongly represented within the age structure, students constitute a sub-population with the highest propensity to migrate. While for some of these students migration is a choice made to complete their study in a foreign country and return home, other students choose to migrate not only for the entire period of their tertiary education but also stay abroad after completion. Albeit their high costs often associated with studying in a foreign country (not only living costs but also tuition fees), this strategy often brings rewards. Foreign degrees delivered by reputed universities come with high prestige adding to fluency in more than one language. Increasingly universities around the world, including those in the countries selected in this study, are tapping this market to recruit international students, especially those affordable ones, to sustain partially their financial basis.

Studying in a foreign country is not always out of choice. More and more migrant students seek in a foreign country an escape to their failure in their home country or a route to circumvent the selection procedures of their higher education systems in order to access the job to which they aspire. With the deepening of crisis in the educational systems of many countries on the continent, the migration choice to study in a foreign country, upon completing the secondary degree level, is more than ever an alternative for those students with low marks at undergraduate level or those having problems to pursue post-graduate studies at home. Even when study is free at home, migrating abroad is a very attractive option.

Several elements suggest that student migration fluxes will intensify in the years to come on the continent with the growing numbers of young people and deepening deterioration of study conditions in many countries. Having an international experience as a student adds value to the degree obtained from a reputable institution and this might be used to secure a job in highly competitive market. In the past years, the migration of students was mainly directed to the former colonial masters because of the linguistic linkages. This migration was also dominantly channelled through bilateral agreements such as those established between the former Soviet Union countries in the Eastern Europe with countries on the African continent. With the end of the cold war in the 1980s and the mounting restrictions to migration imposed by western countries, the migration of students has become more of individual and family projects than government driven. Faced with increased difficulties in finding employment at home, thousands of young people in Africa see in migration abroad a way of gaining a prestigious degree that can provide a way out. For thousands of families, this migration carries positive prospects for betterment, not only for their children but also for themselves, as they see it as an investment for future return through remittances. Finally for the host country of these young migrants, there are benefits associated with the presence of foreign students in the educational system. Put aside the prospects for or potential “brain gain” when graduates decide to stay, there are also financial gains to reap from this migration in terms of fees paid out by those students to the local universities, especially the privately run institutions. Migration of students may also provide the “stocks” of enrolments required to sustain certain programmes which are not taking enough of local students to make them

viable and could face the risk of being shut down. This is particularly the case of scientific programmes at post-graduate level. The countries that are attractive to students may opt to close up national territory to entry as is now the case of South Africa with the new immigration law adopted in 2014. Thus the increasing demand of young Africans to migrate abroad for study could be faced with the wide variation of regulations in immigration policy among host countries.

The data collected in South Africa revealed an interesting pattern of circulation among African migrant students. In a large proportion, most of them stated they had intention to return home after study. For those planning to leave, the timing tended to fall within a one to three years of completing their studies, and naturally this was conditional on actual completion of study. Thus, for the majority of survey respondents, returning to their home country was part of their plans for the near future, and it seemed likely that migration would not translate into a permanent residential relocation for them. Among the group who said they would opt to stay in South Africa, the major reasons cited were related to pursuing further studies and finding employment. This intention was well expressed, with strong optimism, among those with refugee status. This is understandable as South Africa's refugee policy makes provision for individuals with no place to go to remain in the country.