

THE PARADOXES OF PRIVILEGE FOR AFRICA'S BRIGHTEST YET DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD

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OUR MOON



I want to be a global citizen. I want to have the opportunity to go to anywhere in the world at any point in time that I want to, including to Zambia. And I don't want to just restrict myself to solving problems in Zambia but to solving problems and applying my solutions to other countries in Africa, even to different parts of the world. So, if I can have that platform for myself where I am able to move around easily... then that's what it means to go back home.

Dalitso ¹

1. All individual students' names have been changed to protect their identities.

INTRODUCTION

I have been working for the past eight years with inspiring, academically gifted but financially-disadvantaged young people from developing countries helping them to access higher education opportunities abroad. I stumbled into their world when I volunteered and became a trustee of a charity based in the UK after spending many years working firstly as an accountant and latterly as a management consultant in the City of London. My life and the lives of these students have been transformed by our experiences. Just over two years ago, I was encouraged to go to Zambia by a former student as he believed I could make more impact there. Our Moon was established.

Educational development work in the early part of this millennium focussed on enabling the masses to go to school through the Education For All initiative (UNESCO, 2015). Schendel and McCowan (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2015, Oketch et al., 2014) say,

“In recent years... there has been a growing realisation that development, even for the poorest countries, depends on a flourishing [higher education] system.”

Strategic Development Goal No. 4 (SDG, 2013) encourages universities, governments and other organisations to provide more scholarships for tertiary education.

We all make assumptions, and I am no exception. We assume that it is beneficial for the students to study abroad - and that the experience will not only benefit the young persons concerned, but also their families, communities and home country. This is potentially a huge burden for them to cope with. The prospect of failure is forever present.

However, access to universities within their countries is limited if they cannot afford to pay. There is also criticism that due to the lack of government investment over many years in their universities, they have outdated books, weak internet, poor housing and students aren't learning the right skills for work. Graduate unemployment is high:

Too few graduates gain the skills they need to find work. Nowhere is this quality challenge more evident than the transition to the labour market. Graduate unemployment rates are high in many countries and employers across the region complain of a lack of basic, technical and transferable skills. Given the pressures for expansion... absorption of graduates into the labour market will be a significant undertaking.

(McCowan, 2014)

If we assume, therefore, that it is a good thing that young Zambians have the opportunity to study abroad, it raises a number of questions for me: when is the right time for a student to return to their country? Have they gained the necessary skills, as well as qualifications, to be effective back home? Is this type of young person in some way more altruistic than other people and can they be encouraged to consider their social responsibility towards their country? Will they be able to overcome the realities of life back home and not be vulnerable to issues such as unemployment crises, corruption and nepotism?

What I instinctively know is that each student still wishes to make a difference to life back home, but how they do this, manifests itself in different ways and according to their circumstances. It was, therefore, interesting to do the research and see if my instincts were founded.



Helen Leale-Green
Chair and CEO

FINDINGS

Initial motivations to study abroad mainly focussed on getting a better job within their field of interest where they could do something to contribute to their country's development.

“One of the benefits recognised in our society of studying abroad is that you come back with an international qualification and experience of abroad so you won't be looked at in the same way as when you went. Knowledge acquired can be put to the benefit of the community - you learn different ways of applying projects you have done or seen working abroad to home situations. All the challenges must make this worthwhile.”

Mutinta

Students also wanted to study abroad to get a better education with access to better resources and more research opportunities.

All students faced difficulties when they first arrived in a foreign country but they usually overcame these after the first semester. Difficulties included not understanding the grading structure, taking time to make new friends, being under financial pressure from home and making cultural adjustments:

“I was excited coming to a different place; I liked the new air that welcomed me. But I think I was lost in a lot of ways. I didn't have clear expectations of how I should behave. People don't really tell you how you should do things. It was having that crisis - in terms of behaviour and social setting. It was also the spiritual aspect of it - that was very big for me. Because when I was at home everyone believed in the same thing. I hadn't known I would have to take caution about what I could say. I had to be patient with myself to learn and recognise that it was a transition period.”

Chikondi

Another student talked about a different culture shock he experienced:

“It sounds ridiculous, I know, when I say that I suddenly realised what it means to be a black man. Back home in Zambia, there are mainly Zambians. Yes, there are some white people and also some Indians and Chinese, but mostly where I live and where I went to school, I only encountered Zambians. I noticed sometimes that people would judge me before

I had even opened my mouth. Other times, people would ask me questions like: what is African language like? do you have an airport in Zambia? do you wear shoes at school? I found it quite funny that people in developed countries wouldn't know about these things. Others of my friends found it insulting”.

Chabota

There is a huge burden placed on these students. They carry the weight of their families', communities' and countries' expectations on their shoulders. They often have conflicting pressures placed on them from families who believe they should stay abroad and send money home.

“My family can't believe how lucky I am to be studying abroad. They hope I will meet a white American girl, get a good job and settle down here, so that I become rich enough to send money home and support the family. My ambitions lie elsewhere. I want to contribute to change in my country and continent. I feel this very strongly. Everything I do and study is focussed on this goal. My scholarship, however, expects me to go home immediately after my undergraduate degree, and I am not sure that it will be enough to go home with just a bachelor's.”

Another student talked about the choices she wants to make, but also how they might differ for someone else:

“There are different choices for different people. If you're doing computer science and if you're studying in California, you're living right by Silicon Valley. Why would you go home where you wouldn't have the resources to achieve things on a world scale? But it's different for me. The tension is not so much about if you're going home but what you're doing in the world. I want you to let me think about things the way I want to think about them. I don't need reminding I'm African. All of us feel like we want to give back, but don't make us feel it is a debt - it doesn't sit well.”

Mutinta

There was a feeling from the students that they and the lower classes carry the burden of finding solutions to their countries' problems:

“The burden falls on the lower classes to work in jobs that create social change. The rich kids go to university to study what they want to study. They just return home and wait until they get a good job while we have to hit the ground running.

Choolwe

Linked to this burden of hope, is the associated fear of failure:

“To go back home does invoke a number of fears. For me, the fear I have is that I may not succeed or the vision I have may not play out. Or I may not enjoy what I am doing when I go back home. But I counter those fears by saying if I have a platform where I have resources and I am at liberty to try out different things without necessarily affecting myself or the people around me, then I will be able to learn from trying things out. If they fail, you learn on top of that.”

Banipa

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Most of all students feared returning home before they were ready and before they had anything to offer in the workplace. Students felt it would help if they had access to funding, yet there is little investment available to students at this stage of their lives:

“I need a good pocket to start with to ease my transition home. For instance, I know that I will have limited access to hot water, internet and electricity. I want to know that I can afford to set myself up so that I have solar power for heating water and lighting, and have the money to pay for internet, which is so expensive compared to the UK. I have a good network of support, but my network is spread around the world. I need internet to be able to mobilise my network. Without that, many of the benefits of having studied abroad suddenly evaporate.”

Machilika

Other fears included returning home a stranger, being under-utilised in a country where youth are discriminated against and there being no jobs to go home to. This led to discussions about the need to develop and maintain networks back home.

“The MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program gives us a wonderful opportunity to develop our networks not only in our country but also across Africa. It begins with other scholars that are studying at our university and alumni, but also, they give us contacts in companies. Part of the programme enables us to return home most years of our degree. This helps us to keep up with and develop our networks at home. I have just interned with a school back home this summer and I made some really useful contacts. It takes some of the fear out of going home.”

Maluba

A blogger (Takondwa, 2017) says:

“The humbling realisation [is] that home has not been waiting on the edge of its seat for you to arrive, arms held out in waiting for something you could never possess to give it. Home is dynamic as ever, bending, breaking, reshaping itself and self-correcting. It is brimming with possibility. Possibility you have very little to do with. Although you had to leave, it is filled with people who never left - experts who have spent their time thriving in spite of all the aspects of home you hope to contribute to changing”.

But for all this gloom, all the students talked about the transformational experiences of studying abroad.

“Studying abroad has given me a different perspective of looking at life. While most teachings I got back home resonated around the concept of being comfortable with what you have, studying abroad has taught me to always challenge myself and strive to pursue goals that may appear out of my reach.”

Wandifye

One interesting finding was that most transformational activities that the students recorded were the opportunities outside the classroom - for instance, work experience, volunteering and internship opportunities as well as clubs and societies within their universities. One student observed:

“It is as if when they start working at home, that is when they start learning the necessary skills for their career choices. That is not the case for us. We have so many opportunities.”

Kaweme

Of the opportunities to do internships, a young man studying in America said:

“Over the summer, I interned at an engineering firm based in DC. I worked as a structural engineer and project management intern. I learnt so much about the work that engineers do that I couldn’t possibly have learnt just from my course. An added benefit is that I got a job offer to join the firm as a full-time employee after I graduate next year!”

Buchizya

They are also inspired by seeing and watching what goes on around them:

“One of my professors works half his time in my university and the other half of his time is spent at the teaching hospital attached to Makerere University in Uganda. He isn’t even Ugandan and yet he feels such a need to help improve research in diseases prevalent there. Therefore, it is possible to have a foot in both camps and still contribute back home.”

Kambani

There are opportunities to start their own projects while still a student so that they start contributing back home while they are still studying:

“I have really enjoyed working on this project after being funded by a foundation that concentrates on giving out small funding for students. The really cool thing about my project is that I have been able to use some of my engineering skills to design the trailers on the back of the bikes. I feel it has been a great success to date.”

Talai

And returning to the subject of networks, other students that they have met during the course of their studies remain very important:

“We all want to help each other succeed, to be the best versions of ourselves in our work lives. We can all share in each other’s successes. I might be struggling now, but I know that I will be able to go to someone from [my university] and we will together come up with some ideas about how to get on a better footing.”

Chilipadambo

There was good advice for those returning home from a student who had just completed a Master’s degree abroad:

“Come home open-minded about your first job. It will probably not be your dream job, but it should pay you enough so that you continue to support yourself and your family. While you are in that job, then you can look for other jobs. I started off in a bank because I had an economics degree, but I really wanted to work in public health which I had focussed on in my master’s. I now have the job I really wanted and love. But I am still thankful to the bank for what they gave me - including the chance to meet my husband!”

Mwaka



CONCLUSION

The student participants prove that it is possible from very humble circumstances to develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions to lead the way for social change if they are given the chance and support to succeed. Being awarded a scholarship to study at a leading university bestows a huge privilege on a student. None of them would have been awarded their scholarships without demonstrating their commitment to developing their communities. They all feel desirous to contribute in some way. They acknowledged that there is a burden of privilege that falls to them to try to serve the needs of their extended families, communities, country and continent.

So, when is the right time to return home? All the students demonstrated their desire to return home and to make their contribution, but they all wanted to do it in their own time at a point that feels right for them. It might be directly from taking their undergraduate degree, but more likely they would prefer to have time to gain some work experience first and maybe an additional qualification. There was also some debate about where home actually is. Some said that as long as they were making their contribution, then the location should be where the student felt he or she could best make that contribution.

We asked if the students had gained the necessary skills as well as qualifications to be effective back home. It was reassuring that those who had already returned home largely felt satisfied that they were making strong contributions and did not regret having taken the step. However, there was evidence that some students were delaying their return by staying to study for post-graduate qualifications and remain within their comfort zone. Therefore, it is important that students seek advice about their options and for advisers to have a broad mind about helping their students decide on when it is appropriate for them to return home.

It was intriguing to know if the student participants are somehow more altruistic than their counterparts from more financially-privileged backgrounds and if in some way they could be encouraged to consider their wider responsibility towards their country. Could they be willing to sacrifice a high salary, a job on Wall Street or a higher standard of living and be motivated to feel socially-responsible? It was surprising to reveal that 100% of students interviewed who were currently abroad said that they realised that going home would reduce their standard of living, but that they were happy to accept that. Because of their

home backgrounds, because they have witnessed the problems within their society and because they have had the privilege of an education abroad at a highly ranked university, their requirements from their careers are different from other people's. They see the development of their countries as their collective responsibilities and although they need money to survive and make their families comfortable, beyond that, they are willing to make salary and comfort sacrifices.

In answer to the question, will they be able to overcome the realities of life back home and not be vulnerable to corruption, nepotism and the fear of unemployment, the indications are that the students would like to believe that they would not succumb to external pressures.

Aside from these questions, two additional conclusions were drawn from the study. It was noted that transformational experiences tended to happen outside of the classroom. The ubiquitous finding was initially surprising, but emphasized the importance of students developing skills wider than the academic knowledge of their study. The value they placed on volunteering opportunities, work experience, internships and getting jobs was very high. This is due in part to their experiences being outside of their daily routines but also because they could see more clearly the links between what they are studying and what they hope to achieve in their careers and for their countries. Similarly, joining networking groups outside of the university was seen as transformational while not fully appreciating the networking opportunities within the university.

Clearly, studying abroad is in itself a transforming experience. But these additional benefits, generally facilitated by the universities, enable students to make a step change in their total capabilities and, thereby, take advantage of the opportunities open to them. This is something that African universities could learn from and start to implement.

Secondly, any time spent abroad is transformational and has a trickle-down effect. The case of the two students studying for undergraduate degrees at UNZA after a two-year IB course in the UK propelled them to positions of responsibility within the student body. Two other returners who did not study again outside of Zambia are also influential within their communities. One is organising a local TedX conference (<https://www.ted.com/>, 2017) and the other is his overall course representative.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Firstly, it is vital to offer more scholarships and routes into university so that all bright students can be admitted. Students should start preparing themselves for study abroad early so that they can develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions necessary.

Secondly, students should be allowed, with support as necessary, to decide for themselves when the time is right for them to go home to make the most impact.

Thirdly, strong links with organisations operating in Africa should be established to provide internships and volunteering opportunities both during their periods abroad and on their return. Networks of mentors should be developed to ease young people back into their countries of origin and to help set up projects. Students should be encouraged to join networks back home and internationally.

Fourthly, scholarship providers/universities should make sure there are opportunities for their students to return home during their periods of study so that they feel less of a disconnect when they are due to return.

Finally, funding should be made available for young people like our participants who wish to return and begin a start-up but who have no access to finance. This would act as an incentive to return home and take away some of the fear of going back.

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“The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Framework emphasises the potential value of promoting international cooperation in higher education noting that by 2020 ‘there should be a substantial global expansion in the number of scholarship programmes available to developing countries for study in developed and developing countries’ (Target 4b). This is supported by a growing body of international evidence. Our Moon is committed to the furtherance of this goal and ideal. In a world of gross inequalities, such work is worthy of support.”

Chris Yates, Lecturer in International Education at the UCL-Institute of Education



Our Moon is a member of the following organisations:

