

Vignettes of wellbeing, sustainability and migration

Diversifying the narratives in global citizenship education

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»The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes that migration is a powerful driver of sustainable development, for migrants and their communities. It brings significant benefits in the form of skills, strengthening the labour force, investment and cultural diversity, and contributes to improving the lives of communities in their countries of origin through the transfer of skills and financial resources.«

The United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Introduction

This study seeks to broaden and diversify the narratives on global citizenship education by exploring the intersections between wellbeing, sustainability and migration within an international student population in an African context. By intentionally pursuing conceptual integration of three concepts, e.g. migration, sustainability and wellbeing, the study agitates for diverse narratives on student mobility and migration. The study sets out with brief reflections on migration in on the African continent, the notion of sustainability as it is presented in Agenda 2030 of the United Nations (United Nations, 2015) and the

wellbeing of international students in tertiary education. A vignette research methodology is adopted with the purpose of presenting ›zoomed-in‹ moments within the lives of internationally mobile students.

Migration in Africa

The World Migration Report of 2024 from the International Organization for Migration states that approximately 21 million Africans are living in another African country (International Organization for Migration, 2024: 56). This presents a significant increase from 2015 when around 18 million Africans were estimated to be living outside of their country of origin, but still within the region. The World Migration Report of 2024 furthermore indicates that there are variants in terms of the top destinations in Africa for migrants, as well as the top 10 countries of origin (where migrants depart from). In the top 10 destinations, countries such as South Africa, Cote D'Ivoire, Uganda, Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Libya, are indicated. In terms of the top 10 countries of origin where migrants depart from, countries listed include Egypt, Morocco, South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Algeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, as well as Mali.

The same report (International Organization for Migration, 2024: 61, 63, 64, 71, 75, 83) indicates that migration in Africa tends to be irregular. It is often the result of displacement, xenophobia and/or racism. The report suggests that Africans are also vulnerable to climate change, and that migration patterns are also affected by the free movement protocols between African countries (International Organization for Migration, 2024: 63). In Africa, as elsewhere, migration is also often the result of armed conflicts and violent extremism in certain parts of the continent, and most African migration ease to economic hubs on the continent (Kaag & Steel, 2019).

Sustainability

Migration is a cross cutting issue in Agenda 2030 by the United Nations (United Nations, 2015). Migration is relevant to all the Sustainable Development Goals, and 10 of the 17 SDGs have targets and indicators that are directly linked to migration and or mobility (Aniche, 2020: 37).

In the current study, the cross cutting SDGs on migration forms the backdrop of the empirical exploration. SDG 3 on good health and wellbeing that seeks to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages is a central pivot. Wellbeing, as such, is also considered at both the systemic and individual levels of wellbeing.

Aligning with multiple studies on migration and sustainability (Adger et al., 2019; Adger et al., 2024; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2022) the study supports the notion that the benefits of migration should not be seen only from the perspective of what migrants can bring to any given territory, but rather that the relationship between migration and development is much more complex. The political, social and economic processes of potential destination countries also need to be considered and will determine how, where and when migration occurs. The directionality of migration is often circular, yet not frequently depicted as such.

Wellbeing

The wellbeing of migrants may potentially improve following migration. Studies indeed indicate that migrants can become happier by migrating, but it's prerequisite strongly depends on the specific migration stream within which they are migrating and even so, they may not reach comparative levels of happiness as their compatriots in their home country (Hendriks, 2015: 343).

For international students who migrate to countries where they may access optimal educational opportunities, key challenges for their wellbeing may include mental health challenges, lack of social support, various academic stressors, financial concerns, and challenges with accommodation (Newton et al., 2021: 343). While most universities attempt to support international students, students may still experience barriers to accessing university support services due to phenomena such as cultural stigma, language barriers, underresourced support services and students being unaware of available support (Newton et al., 2021: 343).

Lived experiences of internationally mobile students in Africa

This current study braids together the notions of migration, sustainability and wellbeing with the purpose of diversifying the narratives on migration about international students in particular. The study draws on a large scale longitudinal study on student wellbeing at an urban tertiary education university in

Sub Saharan Africa. In the longitudinal study, brief interviews are conducted annually with undergraduate students who are pursuing their first degrees. The study also utilizes online surveys, online psychometrics, focus groups and observations as data collection methods. In the current study, vignettes that have been drafted from observation data serve as a vehicle for empirical exploration. The research question is: »How do experiences of wellbeing present beyond the academic realm in the lives of university students in order to inform understandings of migration?«.

Within the student population at the urban university where the study is conducted, there is a contingent of approximately 3000 international students who are attending university outside their home countries. The international student numbers at the site of the study fluctuated slightly in the period 2020, to 2022 during the global pandemic, but still remained above 3000. It is within this population group where data for the current study was collected. As indicated, the data was observation based with the purpose of creating vignettes.

Vignette 1

It is late on a summer afternoon on the African campus. The jacaranda trees are blooming and the wide open sky is flecked pink from the setting sun. Finches flying around from nest to nest amongst the fever trees that line the pathway to the large student dining hall. Five students are waiting in the foyer of the big hall. Keys, cellphones and water bottles in their hands. Flip-flop sandals. It is games night. More students start to trickle inside. The Pictionary game starts. Slowly. The group is divided into two. Pick a word, make a drawing and then the collective guess work begins: »Mountain! It an easle!«. No. »A house. A chapel. A double story. A doghouse«, they say. No. He sits with his red cap over the bend of his knee. Shaking his head. »Dollar sign, dollars!« he says. Yes! The laughter reverberates around the huge hall. The game continues, one after the other. Students get up, draw the words and return to their seats. »A square!«. »A house!«. »A garden!«. He takes out his notebook and waves it in front of his face to cool off. It is hot. Everyone sloths to the front and then sloths back. No-one is in a hurry. Monotony. He gets up. The entire atmosphere in the hall changes. The energy levels go up. He draws. They guess. He shakes his head with a feigned attitude. Roars of laughter. The time runs out. »Aaaww!«, they say, »so close!« Now the next student also feigns an attitude. More students go to the front. The

game shifts to 30-seconds. Word descriptions only. »Robert Mugabe's other wife?« »Graca Machel«. »Guys can I just ask, Graca Machel was married to Robert Mugabe?!« Students fall over one another in fits of laughter. »Samora Machel, Samora's shaking in his grave ...« He gets up again. »It used to be the most popular phone in South Africa?«, he says. »Blackberry!«, they say instantaneously in a chorus. He puts on his red cap. »You guys, I really like you, I just want you to know I really love you guys«, he says.

Vignette 2

It's a drowsy summer Friday afternoon in February. The university's oldest sandstone building shines in the background. Here at the large outdoor chessboard where he stands, the opening moves have already been made. His opponent is standing on the side of the board. He walks around on the board as he considers his next move. His backpack is still on his back, his thumbs under the shoulder straps. He wears a black cap, a black thin-pipe denim, a striped t-shirt and a large watch with a soft leather strap. He chats with the spectators as he walks around. »What are you going to do?« He asks, smiling. Several moves with bishops and rooks follow. Each player has now already taken six pieces. The spectators come and go. Some stay longer. He rubs his chin. Leans on the king and taps with his fingers on the black cross on top of the piece. Several more moves follow. A move with the white pawn by his opponent, puts him in check. He escapes the check position. He launches a counter-attack and puts his opponent in check with his knight. The white king takes his black pawn. Check-mate. They end the game and talk to each other for the first time. »You are the better man,« he says affectionately. »I was scared all the time.« His opponent teases, »I had to take the pawn, you allowed me to take the pawn«. »It's a good game,« he said. Other students unpack the pieces and start a new game.«

In these vignettes, we see several manifestations of student experience that contribute to representations of wellbeing at the micro-perspectival, individual level. This include, being present in the moment, spending time outdoors, using humor and social connections. These phenomena, as we see it depicted in the vignettes, present counter-intuitive trends that illustrate harmonious relationships amongst diverse students, student agency and solution-focused intentions within the student experience. Similar to a study by Willers (2022:

233) with women refugees, that highlights the importance of personal agency, the current study shows personal agency in students, taking ownership of their wellbeing. Grabowska (2018:868) has indicated categories of social skills in migrants that can be utilised as ›social remittances‹, i.e. »(1) the capability for cross-cultural communication; (2) the capability for dealing with emotional labour; (3) the capability for taking initiative and acting independently«. The vignettes from the current study illustrate experiential applications of all these social skills. It relates to what Geisen (2018: 103) describes as the ›the two basic conditions from which the development of life strategies begins‹, e.g. the available of resources and the capacity of human beings to make their own history.

Furthermore, we see from the vignettes that dominant discourses which often present internationally mobile students as ›receivers of support‹ rather than personal agents, while they are negotiating the landscapes of wellbeing and migration, need to be challenged. In this regard, Louise Ryan, senior professor at London Metropolitan University proposes that we should be listening to migrant stories and historical perspectives when we are investigating this field. In their study on migration and social networks Ryan and D-Angelo (2018: 148) have argued that »different combinations of quantitative, qualitative and visual methods do not just provide richer sets of data and insights, but can allow us to better connect conceptualisations – and ontologies – of social networks with specific methodological frameworks, as we pursue deeper understandings of migration. Though small, the vignettes presented here, therefore provide glimpses in to small moments, that offer alternative gateways into the experiences of international students.

Within the field of migration studies, we often see a perpetuation of narratives of crisis (Casteles, 2011; Metcalfe-Hough, 2022). Yet, this master narrative is also being challenged when it is pointed out that »Migration as crisis rests upon a fragmented, changing, and contested assemblage of events, representations, and practices« (Cantat et al., 2023: 1). Yet still, we do not see equal representations of ›non-crisis‹ moments within the migrant, or international student, experience; and it is perhaps within this fragmented portrayal of experiences that master narratives may be challenged.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of diversifying the narratives on migration, and in this instance international student experiences, the current study aligns with numerous studies that have previously problematised simplistic understandings of migration (Donlic, 2024; Peterlini, 2023; Peterlini & Donlic, 2019). Within these complexities, circular migration movements that is inherent, or frequently inherent, in migration patterns, need to be recognised. International students may move from the home countries, but they often also return after periods of study. Counter narratives that present the varied experiences of international students need to be amplified. Asking the question, Who is benefiting from the master narratives of crisis and alienation?, may be illuminating. The narratives of crisis, often removed from lived realities, may be diverting attention from other challenges within a particular national context. The practice of care, belonging and social support need at least equal representivity.

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