

Higher Education Internationalisation: Evidence from a Ghanaian Public University

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Abstract

This study was aimed at examining the benefits, challenges, and opportunities associated with higher education internationalisation (HEI) in a Ghanaian public university. To achieve these objectives, the study drew data from international students through 17 in-depth interviews, corroborated by evidence from the case university's archival reports. The triangulation of the interviews with archival data enhanced the credibility and robustness of the results. We found that study abroad programs provided respondents the advantage of learning a second international language and enhanced their career advancement in the global job market. However, the language barrier was a major challenge for some international students, hindering their integration into the local learning community. Again, while some research participants highly valued the unique perspective of social integration and intercultural exposure, others struggled to adjust to the new culture. Additionally, the study highlighted high-cost-of-living as a major challenge for international students, impacting their academic performance and overall experience. Meanwhile, the case university's flexible tuition fee payment plan was recognised as a positive initiative to alleviate the financial burdens of international students. Our findings contribute to the literature of HEI in emerging economies and provide valuable insights for universities seeking to enhance the experiences of international students. We conclude that universities hosting international students provide language support, financial assistance, and social integration programs to increase students' learning experience.

Keywords: International Students; Higher Education Internationalisation; Ghana; Study Abroad Programs; University Education

Introduction

Globalisation has significantly expanded access to higher education (HE), largely enabled by high internet penetration (Lee & Stensaker, 2021). In Africa, internet use has increased substantially, providing access to education beyond national borders. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this transformation, normalising virtual learning and reshaping traditional "brick and mortar" teaching models (Torres-Martín et al., 2021). Consequently, the

term *international students* has gained prominence as cross-border enrolment continues to grow. Yet, higher education internationalisation (HEI) remains uneven, with African universities, including those in Ghana, attracting fewer international students compared to institutions in advanced economies. Understanding the experiences of international students is therefore critical to identifying challenges, benefits, and opportunities, and to repositioning Ghana as a hub for international education.

HEI is broadly defined as the integration of global and intercultural dimensions into tertiary education, achieved through hosting foreign students or offering programs across borders (Rapanyane & Shai, 2020). Universities, traditionally non-profit centres of learning, now operate within the global education market (Kinser, 2023). In their pursuit of international relevance, HE institutions employ strategies such as franchising, partnerships, distance learning, exchange programs, credit transfers, and establishing campuses abroad (Mittelmeier et al., 2021).

A central debate in HEI concerns whether universities act primarily as profit-driven enterprises or as centres of excellence in teaching and research (Kinser, 2023). Increasingly, HEI is viewed as a lucrative global industry (Healey & Hickey, 2025). Countries of the global north, such as the UK, have expanded international operations through student recruitment, franchising, and offshore campuses (Healey & Hickey, 2025). These efforts demonstrate how internationalisation can simultaneously enhance academic exchange and generate substantial revenue.

In the past two decades, developing countries have also become attractive to foreign HE investors (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). In Ghana, for example, Lancaster University established a fully-fledged campus in Accra (Asiedu et al., 2024). Other international providers from India, China, and the USA have entered into collaborations with Ghanaian institutions (Teferra et al., 2022). Similar trends are seen in Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt, reflecting Africa's growing role in global HEI (Teferra et al., 2022). Beyond Africa, the Gulf region has also emerged as a hotspot for international branch campuses (Barnawi, 2022).

Strikingly, in regional blocks such as the European Union, HEI is equally widespread among member states (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). For example, the European Commission (2022) reports that the *European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students*

(Erasmus) program has been voted a budget of about 26 billion euros for the 2021 to 2027 academic years. These resources are to enhance students' mobility within partner universities for exchange programs where academic credits are transferable.

The evolution of HEI has been widely researched by academics and practitioners (see e.g., European Commission, 2022; Healey & Hickey, 2025). Meanwhile, the literature dominates HE institutions from the developed world. Despite its international global growth, the strategies of universities in emerging economies remain underexplored. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the internationalisation practices of a Ghanaian public university, with specific attention to international students' perceptions, challenges, and opportunities. The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How do international students perceive and experience the internationalisation strategies of the case university?
2. What challenges do international students face in pursuing higher education at the case university?
3. What opportunities exist for enhancing international students' experiences and strengthening higher education internationalisation at the case university?

The selected case university is one of Africa's leading HE institutions according to recent global rankings (Times HE, 2023). While it attracts students from across Africa and beyond, its proportion of international students remains low (GTEC, 2022). This context provides a relevant setting to investigate barriers to HEI in Ghana. Accordingly, this paper evaluates global trends in internationalisation and considers how these might inform strategies suited to Ghanaian universities.

The study contributes to the limited literature on HEI in developing countries and offers insights for policy and practice. By highlighting the experiences of international students,

we provide recommendations to guide HE governance in Ghana. Importantly, HEI offers benefits beyond financial returns: it facilitates knowledge transfer, intercultural learning, and supports sustainable development through academic collaboration.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the next section reviews relevant literature and the theoretical framework; this is followed by the research methodology, findings, and discussion. The paper concludes with key recommendations for enhancing HEI in Ghana.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

An Overview of Higher Education and Internationalisation Strategies in Ghana

Ghana's higher education (HE) system dates back to the colonial era. It started when the University College of the Gold Coast (now University of Ghana) was established to provide human capital for civil service and economic development (Nicolas, 2021). Since independence, over 15 public universities have been established with specialised mandates such as teacher training, health, energy, and entrepreneurship (GTEC, 2022). In addition, former polytechnics were upgraded to technical universities in 2016 to expand training in applied sciences and vocational skills (GTEC, 2022).

Private participation is also significant. Over 120 accredited private universities operate in Ghana, many faith-based, attracting students from across West Africa (GTEC, 2022; White & Afrane, 2017). For example, Valley View University hosts large numbers of international students from church affiliates in the sub-region. Collectively, these developments demonstrate a diverse HE landscape with both public and private providers engaging in internationalisation.

Ghanaian universities employ various internationalisation strategies. Common approaches include study-abroad programmes and international research collaborations (Atta-Owusu et al., 2021). These enhance cross-cultural

exposure and high-quality research outputs. However, strategies such as *franchising*, *institutional affiliations*, and *greenfield campuses* remain uncommon (GTEC, 2022). The limited adoption of such models underscores the need to explore alternative pathways for advancing HEI in Ghana.

Models of Higher Education Internationalisation

Franchising and Institutional Affiliations

In the traditional business setting, it is a common practice for entities to form alliances with cross-border industry players (Tlemsani et al., 2023). The primary objective of such affiliations is for the parties to benefit from business synergies (Rezaei, 2024). Thus, all affiliate institutions benefit from the strengths of the other party to the contractual arrangement. Such benefits include, among others, knowledge of the local market, access to technology, use of a well-known brand, title to intellectual property, and access to resources (Rezaei, 2024). This is the reason why Tlemsani et al. (2023) posit that individual affiliated institutions benefit from strategic needs that none of them could easily achieve on their own. This arrangement of inter-party strategic relations is usually routed through a franchising model.

Franchising in HE involves one institution (the franchisor) developing academic content, delivery, and assessment criteria, while the partner (franchisee) delivers programmes under agreed terms (Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020). Affiliations provide access to international brands, curricula, and expertise, while the franchisee contributes local market knowledge and infrastructure (Rezaei, 2024). Such collaborations are not always commercially motivated; they may also enhance community engagement, expand research opportunities, and enrich curricula with global perspectives (Knoblauch, 2023; Boahen et al., 2023; De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Quality assurance is central, with franchisors ensuring that standards are maintained to protect

institutional reputation (Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020). Nonetheless, challenges exist. Poor oversight has led to scandals, such as the University of Wales' franchise problems in the early 2010s (Jenkins, 2011). Despite risks, franchising remains popular as it enables access to international education without requiring students to relocate. High tuition and living costs, visa restrictions, and immigration rules make franchised programmes attractive, particularly in developing countries (Knight & Simpson, 2021).

Greenfield Study Centres

Greenfield strategies involve establishing new campuses abroad. Historically, HE export can be traced to colonial models, but in modern times, greenfield campuses have expanded globally (De Wit & Merckx, 2023). While the approach offers ownership and control advantages, it is resource-intensive and high-risk, requiring substantial investment in infrastructure and staff (Beecher & Streitwieser, 2019; Fuchs et al., 2020).

Despite risks, successful cases exist. In Ghana, Lancaster University and the China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) have established campuses, strengthening the country's role in global HE networks (Asiedu et al., 2024; CEIBS, 2022). Similar trends are evident in the Gulf region and Asia, where host governments provide incentives to attract foreign universities (Barnawi, 2022; British Council, 2022). These examples show how greenfield strategies can increase access to international education, though sustainability challenges persist.

Attraction of International Students to Home Campus

This strategy is common to most Ghanaian universities, but it does not encourage performance. The number of Ghanaian students studying in the United States of America (4,061) and the United Kingdom (2,273) alone is more than the total number of international students studying in Ghana (5,301) (UNESCO, 2023). Most foreign students in Ghana come from neighbouring West African countries, with

Nigeria alone accounting for about half of the total (Gyamera & Asare, 2023).

Lee and Schoole (2020) report that a country's attractiveness to international students is demonstrated by political stability, advanced health care systems, low crime rate, hospitality, tolerance for foreigners, respect for human rights, and general economic well-being. Additional attributes that the attracting destination must possess include employment opportunities while schooling, low cost of living, proximity to students' home country, and familiarity with the host country and tourists' attraction sites (Lee & Schoole, 2020). Institutional factors, including global rankings, faculty reputation, and unique academic programmes, also shape decisions (Mwangi & Yao, 2021). Ghana must therefore strengthen both national and institutional attributes to increase its competitiveness in the global education market.

The Eclectic Paradigm Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is the eclectic paradigm, propounded by Dunning (1979). This theory offers valuable perspectives in gaining deeper insights into the motivations, strategies, and challenges encountered by HE institutions as they extend their global reach. The framework explains three interconnected competitive advantage elements and assumes that firms will consider the most cost-effective alternatives while maintaining quality.

Dunning's ownership advantage elements are the internally-generated skills used and managed by the entity and may consist of brand, trademark, copyright, patent rights, and reputation. In the HE setting, academic reputation has been identified as a critical ownership advantage (Massucci & Docampo, 2019). Universities with strong faculty, research, and specialised programs have ownership advantages that attract international students and collaborations (Meneghel et al., 2019). These advantages contribute to the internationalisation process by increasing the institution's appeal and competitiveness in the global education market (Meneghel et al., 2019).

According to the eclectic paradigm, an entity could gain a competitive advantage by operating in a country where resources are readily available. These resources are usually immobile and require a foreign partnership for access (Bakar et al., 2022). In the case of HEI, location advantages can include access to emerging markets, the availability of teaching and research staff, favourable government policies, cultural diversity, and strategic partnerships with local institutions (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). These factors influence the decision of HE institutions to establish international campuses, develop exchange programs, or engage in research collaborations abroad. In the UAE, for instance, the government's provision of physical infrastructure to HE institutions aids the attraction of foreign universities (Chelliah et al., 2019).

Lastly, internalisation advantages consider a situation when it is better for an entity to produce a particular product in-house, rather than to outsource to a third party (Hashai & Adler, 2021). Nonetheless, opting for outsourcing is economically viable where the contracted entity can fulfil the organisation's requirements and maintain quality standards at a reduced cost. Possibly, foreign entities may possess a deeper understanding of the local market or employ highly skilled personnel who are more efficient (Lu et al., 2022). In the context of HEI, the advantages here include the establishment of branch campuses, offering online and joint degree programs, and engagement in academic collaborations. Thus, the internalisation advantages enable HE institutions to expand their reach and provide global learning opportunities to a diverse student body.

In conclusion, HE institutions aiming at developing sustainable internationalisation should identify their distinctive capabilities, establish strategic collaborations, and adjust to local circumstances. Understanding the dynamic relationships in these competitive advantages can inform decision-making and assist institutions in effectively navigating the complexities of the global education market.

Methodology

The case study design (Yin, 2018) was adopted to explore the benefits, challenges, and opportunities of HEI at a Ghanaian public university. In this case study, one of Ghana's leading traditional universities was selected because of its reputation as a top-ranked HE institution in Africa. The case university was recently ranked a world-leader in research impact and part of the top-ten universities in Africa (Times HE 2023). Meanwhile, the case university has a modest population of international students despite its stated policy commitment to internationalisation. The case study design was therefore suitable for this research as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of international students lived experiences, and for us to situate HEI within the real-life institutional context.

The study employed the qualitative research approach and drew data from 17 international students from the case institution. This research design is appropriate when exploring complex and dynamic phenomena in their real-life context (Yin, 2018). Our study employed two data collection techniques: Interviews and archival data. The interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis and lasted between 25 and 36 minutes each. The interviewees were purposively selected. They were made up of both undergraduate and postgraduate students from different countries and enrolled in different disciplines. The interviews were conducted in English, the official language of instruction at the case university.

The interview questions were open-ended to allow us ask follow-up questions for deeper insights into the subject and to achieve clarity (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interviewees were carefully engaged to acquire detailed responses to their personal experiences concerning HEI. All the interviews were tape-recorded after seeking the approval of the research participants. The questions were grouped into three sections. The first set of questions obtained information on participants' biographical data and programs of study. In the second section, the research participants were asked about

their knowledge of the case university before enrolling in a program. Here, information solicited included efforts made by the university to internationalise its programmes. Finally, we sought to know about their experiences as international students; the benefits of studying abroad, challenges they faced, and the opportunities available, especially with regard to their career development.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded manually. Each transcribed data was read repeatedly to gain a general understanding of the content. The initial set of codes was informed by the literature and the objectives of the study. The codes from each interview were compared to the others to ensure inter-coder reliability. New themes that emerged in the course of analysis were also inductively incorporated to reflect participants' voices (Tuffour, 2021). Through axial coding, the themes from the individual interviews were linked to one another to identify relationships and to make meaning.

The archival data employed in this study included policy documents and reports of Ghana's tertiary education regulator (GTEC), the case university's official policy, strategic plans, structures, and practices on internationalisation. Again, we examined periodic reports and publications, including official reports of the Vice Chancellor and the office in charge of international relations. The researchers carefully read these secondary data to identify key themes and patterns relevant to the study's objectives. Here, the manual approach allowed for deeper engagement with the data for nuanced understanding, and to ensure context-relevant interpretation. The aim of using the archival data was twofold. First, these secondary data helped us to corroborate the information provided by the interviewees, thereby strengthening the validity of the study's results, and second, to provide a historical perspective on the university's internationalisation strategy.

We were mindful of ethical considerations throughout the study's stages of development. We took a gatekeeper's permission from the

university authorities before recruiting the research participants. Before the interviews, each participant was informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained. The participants were assured that the data was for research purposes only and that they would be analysed anonymously. They were told about their right to pull out of the study at any time without justification.

Results

We draw on the eclectic paradigm theory to delineate the case university's international students' experiences on the implementation of internationalisation strategies. The results are organised into three themes that correspond to the research objectives: the benefits of HEI for students, the challenges they encounter, and the opportunities created by studying at the case university.

The Benefits of Higher Education Internationalisation

In sharing the benefits attained in studying abroad, the respondents from non-English-speaking countries saw the opportunity in learning a second language as an advantage. The respondents expressed that being proficient in multiple international languages gave them an advantage in job search, over their counterparts who studied in their home country(s). Some of these experiences have been presented below:

'I thought that Ghana, being an English-speaking country would provide a good environment for studying business.'
(Interviewee 16: Business Studies).

'...I'm able to speak both French and English. ...many companies need people that are bilingual. ...and the course I'm doing here, it is not common in my country, so I can easily find a job with my qualification.'

(Interviewee 10: Business Studies).

'I have an advantage over my colleagues that study in my home country because I will be a bilingual. I can speak two languages and in addition to the local [Ghanaian] dialect.' (Interviewee 4: Nursing).

'For me, having a working knowledge of a second international language (English) is good for job opportunities. Although it is difficult to find jobs in my home country, being bilingual gives me a better chance.' (Interviewee 15: Business Studies).

Again, other interviewees claimed that experiencing international cultures was a critical requirement for employment opportunities. The following submissions are in relation to the intercultural benefits of international education:

'I am in a better position when it comes to the analyses of issues because I have rich experience from multiple countries. A student that studied in my home country alone wouldn't have this international experience that I have acquired.' (Interviewee 7: Communication Studies).

'I can find employment in a business that requires someone that can speak multiple languages. And here in Ghana, I know a lot of Ghanaian cultures. So, I can help firms in [my home country] that want to expand to Ghana.' (Interviewee 5: Business Studies).

'Now, I speak multiple languages, so, I am comfortable

working in the international environment. I think it's easy for me to get employment [in my home country] because they [employers] consider Ghana as a very good place for business education.' (Interviewee 16: Business Studies).

Challenges of Higher Education Internationalisation

Language Barrier and Non-Existing Structured Support

Language barrier was a key challenge for respondents who had a limited understanding of the case university's official language of instruction. Excerpts of students' experiences with the language barrier are submitted as follows:

'English was not used as a mode of instruction in my home country. The [case] university did not provide any language support before my studies. I struggled to integrate into the new environment due to language barriers. At the beginning, I felt isolated and unable to express myself well... However, I have made progress through socialisation and that is affecting my studies, positively.' (Interviewee 4: Nursing).

'...it took me several months to build the foundation for the course. No English language support was provided. I took the initiative to study more through colleagues and the friends I made.' (Interviewee 15: Business Studies).

'I faced language and cultural challenges as I am from a Francophone country and had to study in English. I had to put in extra effort to understand

lectures.’ (Interviewee 5: Business Studies).

‘...others [continue to] struggle with the language. There was no language support provided by the [case] university prior to our studies... So, you will be in class and struggle to understand the lecture. So, for international students we seek support from friends to understand the lecture materials.’ (Interviewee 2: Education).

‘...no language support is provided by the school. ... however, foreign students are encouraged to approach lecturers if one doesn’t understand something. I’m making good use of this to improve my learning experience.’ (Interviewee 10: Business Studies).

‘...the university did not provide specific language support for international students before their studies. Initially, I struggled but it’s okay now, I’m managing.’ (Interviewee 16: Business Studies).

Meanwhile, some of the interviewees claimed that the university provided language support to them. These students read programs that have an English component: Their claims are presented below:

‘English language support is provided by the university. The school accommodates international students with language differences... I enjoy the interactive lessons; however, I sometimes have difficulty in understanding lectures due to differences in accent and the

speed of speech.’ (Interviewee 7: Communication Studies).

‘...I was anxious about the language barrier even though I had earlier received some basic training in English before moving to Ghana... However, the university provided me with language support. My minors included the English language. So, with time, gained confidence studying all my courses in English.’ (Interviewee 3: Communication Studies).

The respondents recommended the incorporation of an English proficiency programme to support the learning of the international student:

‘...lecturers should make efforts to help international students understand the course material due to the language barrier.’ (Interviewee 11: Business Studies).

‘I suggest that the university provides special [English] language support for international students ...to make academic life less difficult for us [international students].’ (Interviewee 16: Business Studies).

New Cultures and Social Integration

Some of the interviewees expressed shock about the culture of their new environment, although the university supported them with proper integration programs. Excerpts from these interviews have been presented below:

‘I want to applaud the [case] university because I have seen that there’s really no discrimination between the international and home students. In class, equal opportunities are given to all of us to... express ourselves,

access to the library and other university infrastructure. So, there's really no discrimination between the international and home students.' (Interviewee 3: *Communication Studies*).

'I praise the [case] university for treating all students equally and without discrimination based on their country of origin or language background. We the foreigners are being treated in the same way as the home students.' (Interviewee 4: *Nursing*).

I feel welcomed and have no issues with integration into the Ghanaian society due to the similarities in [my home] culture. (Interviewee 11: *Business Studies*).

The above opinions are corroborated by the Vice Chancellor's reports for two consecutive years:

'... [The university] organised a one-week orientation programme for... international students ...aimed at introducing [them] to their new academic and social environment... [other] meetings discussed issues on academics, communication, socialisation, security... to support them to have a conducive environment...' (Centre for International Education (CIE), 2020, pp. 2, 3).

'...special orientation programmes [organised for international students] ...focus on cultural diversity, shocks and tolerance. [This is] a blend of presentation on academic, health, social, and issues on

familiarization [to the environment].' (CIE, 2020).

Meanwhile, some of the interviewees shared that they struggled to integrate into the new environment despite the orientation programs. Excerpts of these experiences are reported below:

'...in my first semester here, it was hard to adjust to a new schooling system. The entire system in Ghana is completely different from that of my home country. Even though an orientation was organised by the Office of International Relations, it will be great to have individual schools or departmental orientations.' (Interviewee 14: *Business Studies*).

'...for education, my expectation is being met. ...for social integration, I will say no. ...the university can ...organize more social activities for us.' (Interviewee 9: *Business Studies*).

'It is very difficult for me to integrate into study groups. Sometimes, I engage some people to provide me additional learning support. ... they (university) should help us integrate better. ...The lecturers are too fast. Some of us have to interpret to a second language to understand.' (Interviewee 5: *Business Studies*).

'For academic work, I'm getting the best from the school. We [international students] have a [social media] platform ...when you share a problem on the platform, they attend to your need... As for social activities [however], not really

great because it is quite limited. ...Poor integration is impacting my social life in Ghana. (Interviewee 12: Biochemistry).

Again, the Vice Chancellor's report corroborates the intervention put in place to respond to the international students' questions:

'[CIE maintains] ...a vibrant web page and regularly updates on our [social media platforms] ...to ensure that our virtual presence is felt [and to provide] ...prompt feedback.' (CIE, 2016).

High Cost of Living in the Host Country

Some of the respondents submitted that the high cost of living in the host country was impacting their academic performance. High tuition and academic fees were particularly mentioned as significant. These challenges are summarised below:

'...the high cost of living in Ghana affects my... as an international student. ...it is expensive to study in Ghana. (Interviewee 10: Business Studies).

'Cost of living in Ghana is higher, compared to home. This together with high tuition fee is affecting my stay in Ghana.' (Interviewee 4: Nursing).

'The cost of living in Ghana is high. Things here are a bit costly as compared to my [home country]. So, it has actually made my life in Ghana a bit uncomfortable.' (Interviewee 2: Education).

On the other hand, a respondent had a divergent view of the cost-of-living condition in Ghana.

'...from where I'm coming from, I think the cost of living here is okay. Yes, the cost of living in Ghana is reasonable compared to my home country.' (Interviewee 13 Computer Science).

Ghana's high cost of living could as was highlighted by some of the respondents might have contributed to the dwindling number of international students in public universities. A report by the National Council for Tertiary Education (now, GTEC) (2018) shows that the enrolments quota for international students has deteriorated. An excerpt of that report is presented below:

'...international students account for 1.09% of the fulltime student enrolment in the Public Universities. ...the number of international students enrolled... has been reducing in the past four academic years.' (NCTE, 2018).

Some of the respondents claimed that the university has put in place an instalment plan for the payment of tuition fees to ameliorate the high cost-of-living conditions. Portions of those interviews are presented below:

'...In the first year [of my study at the university] I paid all the tuition fees. Now, I am taking advantage of the instalment plan.' (Interviewee 16: Business Studies).

'The tuition fee is a little bit high for us. But they [university] try to make it somehow flexible... by paying half of [the] fees to be able to register [for the courses]. The remainder can be paid on instalment basis.' (Interviewee 5: Business Studies).

Opportunities From Higher Education Internationalisation

Financial Benefits and Cultural Exchange

The research participants expressed that the benefits of internationalisation transcend to the host university. These opinions are submitted below:

'The university recruits international students ...for economic reasons ...through tuition fees. We pay higher fees [compared to home students] ...I also believe that the university wants to broaden its borders to the global community...' (Interviewee 3: Communication Studies).

'The primarily aim for internationalising education is to welcome people from different backgrounds.' (Interviewee 7: Communication Studies).

The Meeting of Learners' Expectations

The respondents shared their experiences on teaching and learning satisfaction at the host university. The following were recorded in that regard:

'So far, the learning experience is good. ...they make effective use of learning aids - it's very, very nice. The entire environment is conducive for academic work. My expectations are being met. ...I have even recommended the school to other people from my home country.' (Interviewee 13 Computer Science).

'In my home country, the lecturers are not going to feed you with every detail. ...but here in Ghana, the lecturers do provide you with detailed lectures and explanations.'

(Interviewee 14: Business Studies).

'...my expectations are being met and surpassed. I believe that the [case] university actually pushed me to my limit as compared to what I was expecting... more pressure was mounted on me. And I believe that has groomed me to be who I am now. And I will definitely recommend this university...to my friends...' (Interviewee 3: Communication Studies).

The high experience levels of the respondents suggests that universities in Ghana have the potential to attract more international students despite the fall in enrolment. This has been acknowledged by Ghana's HE regulator in their strategic plan as:

'Ghana is gradually becoming a centre of tertiary education in Anglophone West Africa. The country is gradually assuming the position of the preferred destination for tertiary education in the sub-region.' (GTEC, 2022).

Discussion

We present the discussion of a study that used interviews and archival data to investigate the benefits, challenges, and opportunities accrued to international students who are studying at a public university in Ghana. These topical issues in the context of emerging economies have not been well explored by scholars of student mobility.

On one hand, most of the participants from non-English speaking countries highlighted the advantage of learning a second international language through a study abroad program. This provided them with the environment to be bilingual, a critical employability skill in a globalised job market. The impact of bilin-

gualism on employability has been well documented (Palacios-Hidalgo et al., 2021). Meanwhile, language was a critical barrier for some international students, posing a major threat to proper integration into the new learning community. Nonetheless, a few of the interviewees acknowledged that the case university provided them with a language support program, though inadequate. Our observation is in line with Yu and Wright's (2016) study of tertiary students' adaptation in new cultures. Some scholars report that language inadequacy makes international students feel disadvantaged, hence, worsens their educational experience (Glass & Cruz, 2023; Phiri et al., 2024).

Additionally, respondents placed a higher value on the intercultural exposure gained through studying abroad. They believed that their exposure to international cultures while studying abroad distinguished them from their counterparts who solely studied in their home countries. Consequently, their experience provides a unique perspective and prepares them for working in diverse settings. Studying abroad offers the unique advantage of gaining intercultural competence and a global perspective, all of which contribute to career advancement (Sisavath, 2021). This finding is similar to a study by McLeod et al. (2021), where exposure to Korean culture was the most important rationale for international students studying in that country.

Our analysis revealed a mixed experience regarding social integration. Some of the research respondents applauded the case university for creating an equal opportunity environment and promoting integration between home and international students. They acknowledged that the university was committed to creating an inclusive learning environment to support their academic pursuit. Interestingly, the respondents who were satisfied with the integration arrangements were mainly from Nigeria, which has close economic, cultural, and political relations with Ghana. This finding supports the argument that rather than being driven by geographic proximity, students choose regional destinations for education based

on their economic, political, and language ties (Hou & Du, 2020; Ovchinnikova et al., 2023). For example, it has been reported that the cultural and economic ties between the UAE and Pakistan influence many Pakistani students to study in the UAE (Glass & Cruz, 2023). Despite the cultural attraction, Woods and Kong (2020) found that international students often struggle to adapt to their new cultural environment. Meanwhile, Gopalan et al. (2019) report that cultural adaptation does not affect academic satisfaction and that academics facilitate international students' better integration into the host country.

Again, some of the interviewees pointed to high tuition fees, accommodation, and the overall cost of living as major factors that significantly impact their academic performance and overall experience. However, a divergent view was expressed by one respondent who considered the cost of living in Ghana to be reasonable compared to their home country. Inferably, individual experiences with economics are influenced by personal circumstances and the country of origin. Khanal and Gaule (2019) confirmed that self-funded international students (including those on scholarship schemes) in Western countries are likely to experience financial challenges. Empirical evidence suggests that a significant number of black African students experience anxiety about meeting their tuition fees and the cost of living (see, e.g., Dabrowski et al., 2025; Szkody et al., 2023). Meanwhile, this was different for international students on Chinese government scholarships in China (Wen & Hu, 2019).

Some of the interviewees acknowledged that the institution of a flexible tuition fee payment system was a valuable support mechanism that ameliorated their financial difficulties. We submit that similar support mechanisms (e.g., advisory services) could be enhanced to increase students' satisfaction and retention rates (Gopalan et al., 2019).

The students interviewed demonstrated that their ability to combine studies and work (including engaging in voluntary work and undertaking internships during the school

vacation periods) equips them with future career opportunities. Again, the interviewees revealed that the university benefits economically through the raising of high tuition fees from international students. This is why researchers recommend that student internship programs, service learning, and other work experiences be offered to attract international students (Van Mol et al., 2021; Hora et al., 2020). Nonetheless, a contrasting opinion from Kim (2023) is that part-time work and internships can sometimes be debilitating to students' academic performance.

Our findings provide insights into the research participants' personal experiences regarding teaching and learning satisfaction at the case university. The analysis reveals that the participants' expectations were largely met by the university, as the interviewees were satisfied with the learning environment and the level of detail provided in lectures, amidst the academic pressure they encountered. It is worth mentioning that some of the participants have recommended the university to prospective students from their home countries. These testimonies reflect the research participants' satisfaction with their teaching and learning environment.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study shed light on the experiences of international students at a Ghanaian public university and provide valuable insights for improving internationalisation strategies in HE. We submit that the managers of HE institutions could create a positive experience for international students by addressing language barriers, promoting social integration, and alleviating their financial burden. The findings have important implications for universities in emerging economies that are often overlooked in the field of student mobility.

We found that studying abroad provided international students with the advantage of learning a second international language, which is a critical employability skill in the global job market. Bilingualism significantly increased their chances of employment, particularly in interna-

tional entities. However, language barriers posed a major challenge for students from non-English-speaking countries, affecting their smooth integration into the learning community. This negatively impacted their educational experience and social interactions with domestic students. Additionally, international students highly valued the intercultural exposure gained from studying abroad. This exposure distinguished them from their peers who studied solely in their home countries and prepared them for working in diverse settings. However, social integration was a mixed experience, with some students praising the case university's efforts to promote integration, while others struggled to adjust to the new culture.

Again, the high cost of living in the host country was a critical challenge for international students, impacting their academic performance and overall experience. However, flexible tuition fee payment plans and institutional support initiatives could alleviate some of these financial burdens and enhance student satisfaction. Moreover, international students at the case university had the opportunity to work and gain practical experience alongside their studies, equipping them with future career opportunities. Although this practical experience was seen as valuable, it could have potential implications for academic performance.

In conclusion, our study sheds light on the benefits, challenges, and opportunities experienced by international students studying at a Ghanaian public university. These findings have implications for emerging economies and highlight the importance of language support programs, social integration initiatives, financial assistance, and practical work experiences for international students. The study contributes to the literature of student mobility in overlooked regions and emphasises the need for further research in this area. Overall, the insights gained from this study can inform policy and practice to enhance the educational experiences and outcomes of international students in emerging economies.

From the models of HEI reviewed in the literature, our findings most strongly support the *attraction of international students to the home campus* model. This model is particularly relevant to Ghanaian universities, where internationalisation is largely realised through hosting students from across Africa and beyond. However, to make this model sustainable and competitive, universities must strengthen their attraction capacity by providing structured language support, promoting meaningful cross-cultural integration, and addressing financial constraints faced by international students. We submit that *franchising* and the building of *greenfield study centres* abroad may not be appropriate HEI models for Ghanaian universities because of the several risks that they carry. For example, the high cost of monitoring academic activities and building physical infrastructure abroad may cause several financial constraints for public universities that are already under-resourced. This may affect the quality of delivery and consequently damage universities' reputational image.

We recommend that language support be provided to international students from countries whose official language(s) differ from those of their host countries. This will improve the academic performance of the international students and facilitate their smooth integration into their new learning environment. Furthermore, to assist in bridging the gap between international and domestic students, universities must establish close links with both groups of students in order to promote knowledge sharing. Consequently, a targeted form of curricula development must be undertaken to provide international and domestic students with the cultural literacy needed for proper integration.

We also recommend that managers of universities that host international students provide support services to alleviate students' economic challenges. Particularly, university management must continue to explore strategies that address the financial challenges faced by international students to promote their academic success and well-being. By implementing these recommen-

dations, universities may attract and retain international students to enhance social relationships and create opportunities for international research collaborations and partnerships. These advantages and opportunities, when seized, would contribute to the host institution's appeal and competitiveness in the global education market.

This research was not without limitations. For example, the findings cannot be generalised since this was a single case study that drew data from 17 international students. The results may be different if the study were conducted in other public universities. We therefore recommend that future studies expand the scope by drawing data from multiple Ghanaian public universities to understand international students lived experiences with HEI strategies.

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Declarations

Conflicts of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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