

# Africa proving popular destination for international students

In 1994, with the end of apartheid, South African universities opened up to the world. Recent research shows that if desirability is any indication, Africa is taking its rightful place in the world as an emerging centre for higher education.



University of Cape Town. (Image: Adrian Frith, via Wikimedia Commons)

The *Open Doors Report* published in 2010, reports that South Africa has become the most popular place to study in Africa, and is ranked 13th - up 12,4% from 2008 - as a preferred study destination for US students.

According to provisional Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) figures, since 1994, the number of international students in South Africa's 23 universities grew dramatically - from 12 600 in 1994, to more than 64 784 in 2010. According to the DHET, about a quarter of these international students at South African universities are studying postgraduate qualifications.

Experiencing a notable influx to its renowned MBA programme is the UCT GSB. Its annual intake of international students is heavy: in 2012, a total of 17 international students enrolled, with more expected later in the year.

## No easy decision, but schools ranking the decider

Pranav Tandon, a native of Shimla, India, is one of the international students who has made the journey to South Africa to study at the UCT GSB this year. For Tandon, the decision to study his MBA halfway across the world was not an easy one and he says the international ranking of the school heavily influenced his decision. The UCT GSB is the only business school in Africa to be ranked in the prestigious *Financial Times*.

"Having decided to study my MBA I started to look around for a good institution to go to, I came across the GSB through the *Financial Times* rankings. The GSB's vision spoke to me personally, but Cape Town is such a beautiful place as well," he says.

Foreign rankings are clearly an important draw card for foreign students in choosing a institution - The University of Cape Town is the highest ranked African university in the QS World University Rankings, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities, and is subsequently home to some 4300 international students from 104 countries; representing 20 % of their student body.

Other notable South African universities report similar interest from international students; the University of Stellenbosch's website reports that 10% of their postgraduate students are foreign; and the University of Witwatersrand has over 2000 international students.

## **A unique context for study**

Another reason why students may come to South Africa is because the country can offer a unique context for study. Director of the UCT GSB and a foreign national himself, Walter Baets, says that while certainly different countries are beset by different issues, his mission as director has been to improve relevance and innovative business thinking.

In addition, placed within an emerging market context, the school is proving increasingly attractive to foreign students looking to do an MBA with a fresh insight into developing economies

Baets believes that the GSB also offers something else fairly unusual, which is a values-based approach to learning. "We're training future CEOs; and whether it be here in Cape Town, or anywhere else in the world, unless you're working towards adding value to a society, then there is no point. You are equipped with the skills to make a difference, and so it is your responsibility to do so. The skills we teach are universally applicable and necessary," he says.

## **Tourism accolades talk**

Recent improvements to both the infrastructure of South Africa, and events such as the 2010 FIFA World Cup, have only added to the choice of South Africa as a destination for students wishing to study in South Africa. As a further draw card, South African cities such as Cape Town are being rated as amongst the world's top tourist destinations more and more often.

The GSB attempts to create a similarly thriving cultural environment. In early 2011, 21 students from the Dubai Men's College visited the GSB for a seminar, and observed that the school had as many divergent cultures as Cape Town itself, which for some of them was the most interesting and surprising aspect of the visit.

There is the consideration that culture shock might serve as an obstacle to student's classroom success; but it is to South Africa's benefit that owing to its own history and multi-cultural population, adaptation - and acceptance of foreign cultures - is surprisingly easy. Tandon believes the different experiences and cultural backgrounds are in fact a great help, and that the group work and discussions enable one to appreciate different perspectives, from a diverse demographic of people.

"An exchange student in our class from Cornell stated that the GSB education was even better than that lauded institution, and think that's a good indication of the standard of excellence that the GSB upholds. The biggest difference I've seen from education in India is in the processes, or the vehicle of learning at the GSB. I'm used to education that relies more on the theoretical - but the GSB takes a very practical stance, which I believe is to tremendous benefit for the learner," he says.

The choice by a steadily growing number of international students of South Africa as a place to study confirms the quality of the country's universities and the international standing of their academics and qualifications.