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The quest for Turkish scholarships: African students, transformation and hopefulness

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The purpose of this study is to move beyond the limited research emphasis on traditional South-North scholarship accessibility. We discuss and analyze how through South-South connections and scholarship opportunities African students rationalize accessibility to scholarships in Turkey. Building on qualitative data collected through interviews, focus groups and discussions with African students in Istanbul, Turkey, this paper finds that the activities as well as the meaning making of African students towards existing Turkish educational and scholarship opportunities, remain essential in understanding the dynamics of African students and accessibility to Turkish scholarships. In their quest for scarce scholarship opportunities, students employ the internet for exchanging information with fellow students; compare opportunities within and beyond Africa while, simultaneously, interacting with formal and informal networks that facilitate scholarship opportunities. Accessibility to Turkish scholarships therefore depends not only on Turkish state funds and its availability, but also on what the students and their networks and community relations are doing separately or together.

Keywords: accessibility, agency, internet, scholarship, students, Turkey

Introduction

This paper deals with the topic of international student mobility (Rickett 1991; Findlay 2011) as well as the recent expansion of South-South international student mobility and connections. The paper particularly focuses on African students and accessibility to Turkish higher education scholarships. In this study, we asked African students the following main question: ‘how do they access Turkish scholarships?’ Global flow of international students continues to increase (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2010; Sison and Brennan 2012; Lan 2017). Though international students largely remain favourable to accessing university education in OECD countries, an increasing number of international students also seek higher education in emerging powers such as China, India and Turkey. For instance, in Turkey, African students constitute 12% of the number of international students in the country (Ünal 2017).

The expanded mobility reflects not just the surge in interest in international higher education, but also the dynamics of an increasingly more transnational global connection which Bauböck and Faist conceptualize as the meeting between transformations from above and transformations from below as the transnational global south and global north undergo/confront transformations from below (Bauböck and Faist 2010; Faist, Aksakal, Schmidt and Faist 2016).

In this study, we analytically differentiate the often rigid and more bureaucratic state and macro oriented transnational structural transformations from the more flexible civic and individual meso and micro generated transnational social/networking transformations. In the first, we established the prevalence of push factors in which African students due to inadequate educational resources are ‘pulled’ to foreign countries in order to obtain a better education (Altbach 2004). While, in the later, we observed, the existence of diverse factors through which

African students, in collaboration with diverse civic groups and networks, aim at improving their socio-economic conditions by accessing scholarships and seeking internationally recognized degrees (Mpiganjira 2011). Apart from reaching out to intermediaries- agents ‘academic borders- guided by academics’ (Sibomana 2016), African students share information and resources.

In our research method, we apply snowball sampling, compiled individual interviews and organized focus groups. We also spent time with student activities and organizations in diverse locations where we met both students who have been in Turkey for a few years and those who arrived recently. As research interest in international student mobility in general and in those seeking scholarships has increased in recent years (Hoffmann 2006; Oyedemi 2012), so far two main theoretical arguments dominate the literature. In the first, departing from the structural proposition which asserts that international scholarships remain largely part of formal state driven international development, international students and other relevant actors respond to the top-down structural transformation emerging from an asymmetric world system (Willinsky 2006; Trent, Lee and Owens-Nicholson 2006). In contrast, the second proposition considers the agency of international students by highlighting individual capabilities as well as the dynamics and the complex social networks through which students engage and contribute to processes of pursuing potential scholarship opportunities (Venegas 2006).

This study complements the research by stressing the agency of international students and their abilities and strategies to make sense of prevailing structural opportunities. We do this by conceptually differentiating two main debates that can help us better understand and explain international student mobility and scholarships provided by emerging powers. The first debate stresses that students often seek scholarships depending on

structural opportunities that emerge within and beyond their countries. The second debate presupposes that students negotiate and navigate existing and emerging scholarship opportunities both from traditional and emerging donors. Although in recent years emerging donors intensified their developmental efforts in regions such as Africa, the process of higher education scholarship facilitation and accessibility is far from being purely a state-centric engagement. This is also a process that reflects an encounter that includes diverse civic groups and organizations that actively contribute to the facilitation of opportunities for students to study and settle in a potential sponsoring host country. By providing international education to students, host states and societies establish links and relationships with student-sending countries and societies-enabling donor countries to attract human capital and might eventually obtain soft power.

Turkey has expanded its engagement in Africa, including in recent years by providing scholarships to a large number of African students. As a regional power, Turkey aims to access and gain influence, particularly soft power in Africa. These are policies not restricted to Turkey as both traditional and emerging powers compete for accessing resources on the African continent. Consequently, Turkey provides expanded resources and accessibility to Turkish universities to accommodate African students. Though less restrictive when compared to traditional donors, Turkish authorities occasionally introduce administrative and linguistic capability conditions on students wanting access to international scholarships. Universities, NGOs and other intermediate agents also influence the accessibility and distribution of scholarships.

African students characterize Turkish university scholarships first as a window of opportunity that transforms despair to hopefulness. Secondly, for African students, Turkish scholarships fill an existing developmental gap left by their own governments that supposedly should give them educational and job opportunities. Thirdly, students, though considering a Turkish scholarship as savior, remain personally engaged and active in aiding fellow African students gain access to scholarship opportunities by utilizing the internet and social media for not just the task of processing scholarship applications and communicating with Turkish authorities and universities, but also linking and contributing to diverse networks that process, negotiate and sometimes facilitate scholarship opportunities.

In conclusion, this research finds that the combination of the structural transformations in which emerging powers such as Turkey provide educational opportunities for African students and the willingness of students to seek platforms in connecting to diverse groups and networks facilitates accessibility to scholarship opportunities. Thus, we consider the accessibility of African students to Turkish scholarships as a process that should be understood and explained from both the structural side of states strategically seeking soft power through international students and students as social agents in making and forming transnational development processes.

Method consideration

The main question inquired in this paper is: How do African students access Turkish higher education scholarships? We were particularly interested in understanding and explaining the prevailing conditions in which African students confront challenges in accessing higher education opportunities in their home countries. We collected the data for this research through a combination of purposive and snowball or chain-referral sampling (Bryman 2008, 183–85) from 30 African students in Istanbul, Turkey. In addition to information collected from individual interviews, the data also included three focus groups of which the first concentrated on students who had just arrived in Turkey recently, while the second and the third focus groups discussed issues with African students who had been in the country for between two and four years, some of whom had come to Turkey to pursue graduate studies. The primary interview schedule comprised the main question followed by open-ended questions. The average length of the interviews ranged from half-an-hour to an hour and resulted in roughly several type-written transcript pages. We interviewed students at their campuses or at agreed-upon locations. The three focus groups were carried out between December 2017 and February 2018.

The average age of the respondents in all samples ranged from 22 to 26, whereas the final sample consisted of 25 males and five females. The citations used in this paper represent the responses of the majority of the sample. We transcribed the interviews verbatim and stored them as Word files, assigning an identification number to each case. The initial coding consisted of a detailed reading of each interview, in an open coding, followed by axial and selective coding (Charmaz 2006, 57–8). In the open-coding phase, we organized the data into discrete units and examined them for similarities and differences. In other words, we used open coding to fracture data so as to identify important categories, their properties and dimensions. Once we identified those, we further examined the data for connections between categories and subcategories with triangulation of the data collected from the individual interviews and focus groups for improved reliability. This process resulted in the development of the following main headings: Rationale for Turkey sponsoring scholarships; Intermediate connections and diversity among African students; Comparing and assessing quality of higher education.

The literature

Research focus on the accessibility of scholarships generated a number of theoretical and empirical studies concerning the manner in which students seek and access international scholarships (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2010; Guruz 2011; Choudaha and Chang 2012). The activities by scholarship-seeking students take two main forms. The first opines that students access scholarships in responding to the structural transformations in which traditional and emerging donors provide scholarships with the aim of promoting their own foreign policy strategies (Findlay 2011; Perraton 2017). The second proposition suggests that the activities of the students reflect

individual ambitions and strategies to access and accumulate limited resources by gathering information as well as interacting and linking to diverse networks that can facilitate such wishes and processes. Students remain not passive to structural expansion, but represent rational agents that adopt, form and reproduce social networks (Beech 2015). An analysis of a number of published qualitative and ethnographic scholarly papers concerning scholarship sponsorship and accessibility suggest that both donor strategies as well as individual student aspirations acts as the premise for understanding the dynamics of international scholarship attainment (McMahon 1992; Sutton 1993; Kondakci 2011; Macrander 2017). Various scholars (McMahon 1992; Sutton 1993; Chen and Barnett 2000) have explored situations in which scholarship accessibility manifests itself at the macro, meso and micro levels, the consequences being the students' ability to access diverse scholarships under different situations.

In the proposition supporting the existence of state-centered structural mobility in student scholarships, Macrander (2017) finds that developed countries represent receivers, whereas developing countries function as source countries by sending students abroad. This conclusion suggests the existence of an asymmetric world system in which wealthier countries remain the core drivers of student mobility and accessibility to scholarships. Building on studies that find student mobility and global knowledge transfers converging with global political, economic and cultural interactions, numerous studies (McMahon 1992; Sutton 1993; Chen and Barnett 2000; Maringe and Carter 2007) support the findings that global student mobility reflects economic inequality and hegemony. Most studies confine international students' migratory intentions as a stay-return binary. As a result, a significant number of studies contain the dichotomy of 'onwards or homewards?' (Sage, Evandrou, and Falkingham 2013). Although there exists substantial research on student mobility (Ong 1999; Ackers 2005; Waters 2005; Vinken 2007; Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014), so far few studies have focused on the rationalization and the experiences of students (Balaz and Williams 2004; Ferro, 2004, Bofo-Arthur, 2014). Studies also focus on the narrow 'stay-return' framework (Geddie 2013; Tan and Hugo 2016), thereby not highlighting the transnational conditions that many students often experience in trying to combine the opportunities provided by two or more nations.

Despite Turkey being an emerging power, the country has attracted limited scholarly attention as a destination for international students. In a study on international students seeking education in Turkey, Kondakci (2011) partially confirmed the existence of an unequal macro global world system in suggesting that students from developed countries come to Turkey for private rationale grounds, while students from developing countries come for economic and educational degree acquiring reasons. Several studies on international African students have also shown that African students seek opportunities due to a lack of these opportunities in their countries. Similarly, students refer to the quality of education abroad which

they suggest provides them with greater value and recognition.

Clearly there exists donor hegemony in which powerful countries seek soft power. Turkey favours African students due to strategic interests in forming particular mobility and migration to their countries. As Ong (2006) asserted, immigrants who fall under 'highly skilled migrants' have far more entitlements and benefits in particular national contexts while other migrants from the same nation might not get the same kind of agency or recognition.

The limitation with these studies is that they fail to mention the role of intermediate civic groups in international student mobility. These groups often balance global educational inequality and mobilize resources for international students and their countries. In addition, studies briefly refer to the agency of international students as well as their perceptions of scholarship opportunities.

In expanding research by Kondakci as well as other studies on international student mobility and scholarship accessibility in relation to Turkey, our research brings the African dimension with emphasis on student perspectives and rationalization of Turkish scholarship opportunities. In addition, our research complements studies that examined scholarship accessibility from agency perspectives such as Willinsky (2006) suggesting that scholarship accessibility has more to do with the rationalization and meaning making by students who seek and apply for scholarships. Similarly, Robertson (2013) points to the fact that though the structural hierarchy might dictate and form potential outcomes, daily experiences and student struggles for scholarship accessibility is also relevant (Sherry et al. 2010). It is therefore not only structures per se that determine how students seek and obtain scholarships but also students' individual agency in pursuing a better outcome within the structural opportunities provided by macro structures such as states and societies. According to Chen and Barnett (2000), student activities and meaning making have conceptual priority because the construction of scholarship accessibility is also fundamentally situational in such a manner that individuals differ in their evaluation of scholarship accessibility.

Recent studies have also shown innovative student strategies and transformations at the transnational level (Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014). As Marginson (2014) notes, there is more emphasis on how states and institutions form student opportunities than on student driven self-transformation. This focus could underestimate student agency, as argued by Moores (2012) who asserts that students generate social and media interaction from their life-world in a kind of transnational strategy for investing cultural capital.

In essence, this paper partially complements these findings, but also suggests that in order to fully understand the nature of scholarship accessibility, we need cogent approaches that can combine prevailing structural transformations in the process of providing scholarships to students, as well as the situational and experiential conditions of students who pursue suitable scholarship opportunities.

Conceptualizing African students' international scholarships accessibility

By obtaining international scholarships, African students connect their homelands with host societies. Unlike earlier conceptualizations of international student scholarships that focused on student departure for scholarships and eventual return, in this paper we call for empirical realization involving African students, not just as numbers and objects for international state diplomacy, but also as meaning making and rationalizing transformative beings. For African students, accessing Turkish scholarships constitutes a living reality, not just as a means to an end but also as a process that nourishes transnational empowerment. Such processes enable students to move beyond divisive conceptualizations and towards a multiplicity of opportunities. Consequently, student agency coupled with efforts from intermediate civic groups transform scholarship accessibility from a hierarchical state policy orientation towards a vibrant civic transnational space. Often students inquire about scholarships through friends, networks and online platforms, encountering governmental agencies and NGOs that, through formal and informal networks, enable students to pursue scholarship opportunities.

State generated scholarship accessibility

African governments often fail to provide higher education for their youth populations. Usually, properly functioning governments ensure public education. The deficiency relates to the lack of funding as well as embedded governance challenges and mismanagement. C. Right Mills' famous dictum holds that 'personal troubles are public problems'. Being without jobs and education might appear an individual challenge. Rather, the deficit reflects a society's inability or unwillingness to provide opportunities for its current and future generations. Consequently, increasing numbers of African students seek educational opportunities abroad at a time when the number of higher educational institutions has never been higher on the continent (Mohamedbhai 2014). Obviously, students sometimes prefer pursuing opportunities abroad. Research conclusions suggest that such developments mainly relate to the governance challenges in Africa, especially the persistence of a lack of policy priorities in higher education (Mamdani 2007; Teferra and Knight 2008; Kritz 2015). If both jobs and educational opportunities remain scarce, the youth population often migrates, either to major cities with potentially higher education opportunities or, if their economy and class position allows, abroad, where they have better access to opportunities. Often, families gather resources and send their children abroad using a combination of scholarships and self-supporting mechanisms. The quest for scholarships, thus, remains an integral part of the wider structural adjustment by diverse groups seeking material as well as human capital accumulation (Waters 2005, 370).

In addition, the limitations trigger dynamic transnational connections under which migrants, hereunder students, find opportunities elsewhere (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1992). Eventually such

mobility constructs what Hannerz called a 'transnational space' (Hannerz 1996) representing new forms of connections, reducible to neither host nor homeland orientation.

In capitalizing this structural gap for their own national interests, emerging powers provide scholarships to selected African students. In a potential accumulation of soft power, donors strengthen relations with African countries through student scholarships (Trilokekar 2010). Henceforth, emerging powers such as China, India and Turkey increasingly provide scholarships to African students. The aim is to access valuable resources in the region (Carmody 2016). Students seeking alternatives to overcome mainly governmental created educational gap encounter soft-power seeking emerging donors that will provide student scholarships for strategic reasons. Though donors offer opportunities, students also seek alternatives on their own in reducing the gap. While the developmental efforts of providing students accessing foreign educational opportunities represents a positive step, it could also lead to a 'brain drain' in which sending countries risk human capital flight or loss (Mpiganjira 2011). On the positive side, student mobility might foster 'brain gain' or 'brain circulation' (Lee and Kim 2010). The process also reflects the wider attempts by states in providing higher education programmes in trying to win 'hearts and minds' and thereby eventually obtaining soft power (Scott-Smith 2003; O'Mara 2012). Such strategies have existed since colonial times (Rizvi 2011) and, according to Nye, scholarships strengthen the foreign policy of scholarship-providing states (Nye 2004, 44). The gesture also creates closer connections between dominant states in relation to subordinate ones (Papatsiba 2006; Atkinson 2010; Wilson 2014). The recruitment of the educated African youth could therefore potentially represent a challenge to Africa's development.

Though recognizing the state-centered conception of international student scholarships, building on empirical data collected in Turkey among African students, our research shows that increased mobility and interconnection with expanded opportunities has enhanced transnational opportunities and networks. We demonstrate that the generation and facilitation of scholarship opportunities is not restricted to nation-state rationalization. Instead, diverse civic groups, including students and intermediate agencies, perform crucial roles in the pursuit of higher education in emerging powers and donors.

Intermediates and student agency crucial for scholarship accessibility

The mobility of increasing numbers of international students to particularly emerging countries might reflect personal as well as well as a youth group ambition and agency. Such processes also relate to the support by immediate relations and civil society networks. Given the structurally conditioned realities in many African states, such as the lack of welfare and limited educational opportunities, students employ social networking and individual strategies to maximize scholarship opportunities. African students, in the process of comparing and selecting scholarship opportunities, consider higher education abroad not just a onetime chance but also an

opportunity to obtain higher and better quality education (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2010). The concerns on the deterioration on the quality of higher education exceed students. Since the 1980s, academics have also been seeking alternatives, a process that has increased the brain drain from numerous African countries (Mamdani 2007; Gribble 2008; Daniels 2014). Governance challenges also perpetuate lack of trust in the education system (Teferra and Altbachl 2004).

According to Bourdieu, humans do not only relate to formal organizations such as the state. People often simultaneously involve themselves in multiple social processes in search of recognition, including the consolidation of social position as well as the search for potential upward mobility (Bourdieu 1986, 102). To achieve this, students interact and negotiate with diverse groups from states and civic groups (Brown and Holloway 2008, 235).

Apart from strategizing for external scholarship opportunities, students find emerging countries like Turkey more accessible than traditional western destinations. This has to do with the fact that even with full scholarships, students have additional expenses when pursuing higher education in a foreign country (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2010). African students seeking to study abroad result from multiple factors. Students dream of a better future and further education. After finishing basic school, many of them confront a lack of opportunities to further their studies. However, the majority of them cannot afford this due to their families' financial incapability. The relatives of many young people expect them to sustain their wellbeing. For the few who might afford educational opportunities in their country, it is difficult to cover the cost of such education. Subsequently, countries with economic power and expanding international efforts, especially towards Africa, fill the gap left by African states.

African students and the quest for Turkish scholarships

Rationalizing Turkish scholarships

Getting a university scholarship has a status in the social, economic and political order of a society. It is not just a relationship between students seeking and obtaining scholarships, but a relationship involving multiple actors in multiple sites and locations.

First, the states providing these scholarships might obtain heightened conditions of diplomacy and soft power, while recipient states would consider such scholarships as recognition and an extension of friendship and solidarity. Although this relationship is unequal, as one is the giver and the other is the taker, both parties consider such relationships structurally significant, a process that benefits both the national and international order. For scholarship-providing countries, international relations and soft power is the denominator, while for scholarship-receiving countries solidarity and knowledge transfers represent the denominator.

Secondly, for the universities and other civic groups and organizations, scholarships help them increase student admissions and ensure the transfer of education and international solidarity and social relations across

national boundaries. This is also part of promoting global solidarity in education and thereby fostering better relations between societies:

African students apply for scholarships from their countries. It is not difficult for them to access because we have numerous opportunities. We cover the tuition and 50% of the costs. I and my colleague Suleiman are employed to assist students who might need help. (Interview with a university official, January 2018, Istanbul)

Thirdly, for the individual students involved in the search for scholarships, the main aim is to balance unequal relationships resulting from their inability to access opportunities in their own countries and elsewhere due their lack of social privilege. For the families of the students it represents an improvement as they will avoid seeing their youth without hope. For students, scholarship accessibility hinges on the denominator, which is education and their status as graduates.

I came to Turkey through the Turkish government scholarship and I came to study. The reason being that the standards of education here is higher than that of my country. I came here to study since it has always been my dream to study abroad and when I got the Turkish scholarship, I felt my dream fulfilled. It could have been difficult to pursue a postgraduate study in Kenya because of money needed and scarce jobs, (Interviews, January 2018, Istanbul)

In debates on international student mobility and scholarships provided by emerging powers, so far two main conceptions dominate the discourse. First is the idea that students seek scholarship following individual personal wishes to migrate and study abroad. The second is the presumption that students negotiate and navigate existing and emerging scholarship opportunities both from traditional and emerging donors, although in recent years emerging donors have intensified their developmental efforts in regions such as Africa. The process of higher education scholarship facilitation and accessibility is far from being a purely state-centric engagement but reflects an encounter that includes diverse civic groups and organizations that actively contribute to the facilitation of opportunities for students to study and settle in a potential sponsoring host country. By providing international education to students, host states and societies establish links and relationships with student-sending countries and societies-enabling donor countries to attract human capital and might eventually obtain a soft power.

Expanding scholarship opportunities for development and soft power

In recent years, Turkey, as an emerging power, has increased scholarships to African students. This has led to the rise of scholarship applications and subsequent admissions. Turkish authorities have introduced certain conditions for accessing these scholarships. Potential students should demonstrate motivation and willingness to acquire language competence after arriving in the host country. This is slightly different from earlier scholarship providers that often demanded linguistic competence from student prior to them being able to access scholarship opportunities. While studying languages inapplicable

globally might demotivate some students, general restrictive linguistic measures prevent some students from realizing their dreams. In addition, similar to other donors, Turkey also links accessibility of scholarships to capacity building programmes approved through bilateral developmental agreements between Turkey and African recipient states. Such inter-governmental scholarships with specific conditions attached pose certain challenges to students, particularly those lacking government network connections. In the worst cases, Turkish scholarships might go to a limited number of students with good links to government officials. To prevent such cases, Turkish representatives more or less directly communicate with potential scholarship applicants.

Then I applied to Turkey and after interviews I was accepted. I was happy when I received the mail from the Turkish with a letter starting with “congratulations”. I was excited - I have never been so happy. The future was bleak and I had no other options - there was joblessness - it was difficult to get a job. Even worse they will conscript you into the army for national service and I did not want to do that ... The Turkish embassy ordered everything. I was given a ticket and I arrived here. I was received at the airport and was given accommodation and I started language classes. (Interview, December 2017, Istanbul).

In re-establishing the students’ hopefulness, Turkish scholarships provide alternative solutions to the prevailing multiple challenges of unemployment and scarce opportunities African students confront. Strategically, therefore, Turkey as an emerging donor, places itself between seemingly non-responsive African governments that fail to provide opportunities for their own youth and traditional western donors that in recent years have reduced and restricted accessibility to scholarships. Through scholarship opportunities, Turkey strategically employs diplomacy and soft power in simultaneously engaging not just African students but also their societies. For instance, the concrete action of a foreign embassy opening its doors for students and directly communicating with them contradicts the normally larger bureaucratic gap between African students and their national authorities. Here one sees the difference between responsive vs non-responsive governments and the role donors play in this relationship. The Turkish expansion of funding opportunities for research and scholarship has resulted in Turkey becoming an educational destination for African students. Diverse government subsidized scholarships are accessible, linking the government, universities and international students. For the universities, the availability of funded scholarships secures them increased admission of students and additional job opportunities for their staff. This positive gesture does not necessarily mean that Turkey’s expansion of scholarship opportunities is challenge free as the following statement by university staff in Turkey suggests:

African students work hard and are ambitious. But many have numerous challenges, cultural and economic. In addition, they want to study particular subjects which they have difficulties to study as some are not good in math, etc. (Interviews, January 2018, Istanbul)

Turkey also provides scholarship application portals that provide applicants with matching options for the universities with the programmes they desire to pursue. This

makes the application easy since it provides applicants with universities and programme options that closely match what they are looking for, aiding them in making the best choice among the alternatives. Sponsors provide alternatives in relation to the study background for graduates and in line with career goals for applicants wishing to begin their university education in Turkey. This serves the twin purpose of deepening African students’ skills in a particular field of choice as well as meeting their career goals, an opportunity to realize their career dreams that they would not get in their home countries. The eventual placement of applicants at a university and in the programmes they desired is both fulfilling and encouraging and hence these eventual Turkish scholarship holders experience a feeling of satisfaction. This makes successful applicants encourage other potential applicants to apply for Turkish scholarships which explains the current high number of applicants these scholarships are attracting both from Africa and beyond.¹

Intermediate connections and diversity in the quest for scholarships

As African students confront lack of career opportunities and joblessness in their home countries, and by not giving up hope, some of them seek alternative prospects abroad by dealing with countries and agencies that provide or facilitate such opportunities. Among other prevailing challenges, joblessness as well as the lack of prospects in their home countries drive the students to seek and apply for foreign scholarships. This is particularly the case for graduates who concluded their first degree and failed to secure subsequent jobs.

When I graduated, I did not have much to do; there was joblessness in the country. So, I decided to apply for scholarships abroad. First, I applied for Canada and South Korea. I got a response from South Korea and I was interviewed through skype, but they wanted candidates connected to the government because they wanted to help the state. Canada needed TOEFL, which I did not have at the time. (Interviews, February 2018, Istanbul)

Students seeking scholarships often interact with and connect to other opportunity-seeking youth through the internet and social media (Waweru 2017). These include students who have been in the destination countries for a period of time, who share information with students and friends they left behind. In response, students in the homeland become restless and seek more information eventually generating a willingness to migrate and join their friends abroad. Through informal networks, students disseminate, share and exchange information, including about scholarship opportunities. Information technology is an important mechanism that fosters and sustains student networking. It enables students to reach out to other students and manage inter-student networking and empowerment. This proves that students are not just receiving information but also sharing and developing it. In this way, they get the best out of it. For instance, with regard to the availability of scholarships, students often get information from official portals. Such portals are accessible through formal and informal networks. Authorities also broadcast scholarship opportunities in the

national media. However, not everyone in Africa can access the internet. Many students complain about internet problems in their home countries, especially when processing applications which contain large data. Some governments, including Turkey, also provide scholarship programmes often based with embassies and selected NGOs. The process of interviewing and selecting students takes place within the embassy and other more easily accessible venues for the applicants.

The process of moving to Turkey starts with talking to friends and using social media. Over time, students discover opportunities from media and the internet. Then the application process starts, often through direct online forms, from which students go through selection processes and interviews. Obviously, IT and embassies play an important role in this. Students with bad internet connections will have difficulties in accessing scholarships, as documents and other files must be sent through the net and that will require resources (Oyedemi 2012).

For students, social media platforms like Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram, Hangouts et al makes sharing and passing information easier. Students who are already in Turkey share about scholarship opportunities with their fellow Africans who are aspiring to come and study in Turkey through these platforms. They also inform them about the requirements hence preparing them early enough for the application. This informal approach supplements the formal Turkish Scholarship orientation that also encourage information sharing by notifying the students about the call for application of the scholarship for their countries (using students as intermediary). Turkish authorities also disseminate information through their embassies abroad hence making this scholarship easily accessible to many African students. The approach bypasses existing rigid government bureaucracy by allowing interested applicants to apply directly to the scholarship body. This does not only increase access but also reduce the time within which applicants can process and send their applications.

In similar vein, there exist diversity among graduates and undergraduates seeking Turkish Scholarship. Undergraduate African students coming to Turkey for studies comparatively confront more challenges than graduates who pursue further education. Graduate African students seem more exposed to academic work and research. Similarly, they have a wide network where they share information from membership to university social media platforms to lecturers who belong to international networks hence can easily access information about the Turkish scholarship. In addition, graduate students are also seasonal users of digital mobile handsets with internet access functionality and can more easily access information about the Turkish Scholarship. The situation is not the same for those who are applying for undergraduate studies since they are just coming from High school with more or less closed social network hindered by restricted access to technology hence facing more challenges in accessing information about the scholarship. Graduate students have better capabilities in dealing with research challenges and emerging stress- based on their experiences of overcoming educational obstacles. The kind of networks

they access and probably the system gives post graduates more space (Ye 2005).

African students are sometimes overambitious – and they are interested in studying particular subjects such as medicine, science, etc., although the staff provides assistance, they also complain about African students' demands and ambitions that are not always achievable. Staff differentiate between students who work hard and those who do not and those who are ambitious with high expectations and demands confronting realities dreams/ambitions versus institutional requirements. Some of the African students studying in Turkey also confirm such tendencies:

I study fisheries he says, but this subject is not appreciated by many students and my people. (Interviews, January 2018, Istanbul)

Comparing and qualifying scholarship opportunities

African students who come to Turkey view Turkish education to be of better quality than that in their own countries. This acts as a key motivator for them to come to Turkey to take advantage of the quality education. They associate better quality education with favourable competition in the job market as well as acquiring additional skills in their field of study. In international rankings, Turkish higher education occupies a better position than most higher education institutions in Africa, South Africa excluded.² This is also historical as the elites and the better educated have for generations longed for and favoured foreign education.

I have been here now for four years and I visited many countries in the US, Europe, Poland and other places together with my university and students. (Interview, January 2018, Istanbul)

Students find the Turkish scholarships as a link to other opportunities. After arriving in Turkey, for instance, students can join European programmes that give them opportunities to travel to other European countries, together with their fellow Turkish students. In this regard, students consider Turkey as stepping stone to other western countries. Such chances often do not exist in Africa. The west remains an ideal destination for African students. Through experiences of different European cultures and through travel, etc., students acquire increased empowerment in engaging in activities involving multiple networks and opportunities. Such opportunities include transnational student connections in which students, through travels and exchanges, not just acquire education but also transnational networks that they build on.

When students get scholarships their lives might improve, but new challenges often emerge, and students must deal with these obstacles. This stems particularly from the students' ambitions which face other structural constraints and require extra forms of commitments.

When I finished my BA studies I wanted to go abroad. Through friends I got to know about the Turkish scholarships, and I applied. Now I did a Master's of Business in Finance and now I am doing a MBA. My plan is to get a PhD either in Turkey, the Czech Republic – or in other countries. (Interviews, January 2018, Istanbul)

There is a wish to go abroad by some students. The aim is to be more cosmopolitan in acquiring international experience. These ambitions reflect new dynamics. It is not only the limited opportunities at home but an appetite for foreign education that also informs students in the quest to study abroad. In addition, the increasing hegemonic role of some countries and probably higher standards of education makes students long to go and study in these countries. Students view the west as better than both Turkey and Africa and it is the target for further education and migration. This suggests a willingness to obtain numerous degrees and remaining on the move, seeking opportunities. The rationale for attractive western education is that the world is still divided into core countries, representing the most dominant and wealthiest and developing countries which have numerous challenges and struggling populations.

It was not difficult to access the Turkish scholarship. This was a free scholarship and easy ... if I have to pursue in my country or other countries it would cost me. Another reason was the Turkish is better and if I return it will give me jobs. (Interviews, February 2018, Istanbul)

For African students, Turkish scholarships seem relatively more accessible than those from other countries and even within Africa. This is probably related to the limited African investment in higher education, with either low or non-existing subsidies for education. Increasingly, Turkish education is valued more in Africa compared to domestic universities. There is also the issue of accreditation of education in general but also foreign acquired degrees. Clearly, power relations and policies regulate the accessibility of these scholarships as well as the international accreditation of higher education.

For African students, the quest for scholarships begins with informal exchanges with student friends and close networks. Then students employ the internet for further communication and exchanges with scholarship providers. Eventually, students link to both Turkish civic groups, students who are already in Turkey and Turkish authorities to process and finalize their applications. Students who then get approved and obtain scholarships travel to Turkey to further improve their educational and career opportunities.

Conclusion

In this paper, we identified the process in which African students seek and access higher education scholarships in Turkey, first by receiving information about the scholarship either through their transnational networks or through their pro-active search for this information through the internet; secondly, the actual application through the internet to the scholarship body via their portal; thirdly, the announcement of shortlisted candidates and their eventual invitation to the interview; fourthly, the announcement of the successful scholars and their placement at various universities and Turkish language learning centres; and finally the visit to the embassies for verification of the academic certificates and visa applications. Upon receiving their visas, the scholarship body then provides a flexible range of days for the scholars, who get air-tickets, to travel and arrive in Turkey where they are received

under the 'meet and greet' programme, which them to settle. The core of the analysis in this study has been to find out whether the scholarship-seeking activities are a choice, functional or structural. African students might operate independently, but they are partially able to shape their lives; thus not only choice is important but also contexts and backgrounds. Time is also important, as students gradually change strategies and platforms depending on the information and resources they access. Despite limitations, the current research provides rare insight into how African students seek and access Turkish scholarships by constructing and combining formally and informally.

Theoretically, the research complements the diverse research that suggests the significance of state and structural platforms, but also adds that how students perceive and employ such opportunities is critical in understanding the sponsorship and accessibility of scholarships. Our findings show that African students, though confronting structural limitations both at home and abroad, maximize opportunities through the process of compiling of information and the contribution and formation of diverse formal and informal networks. These networks help them overcome the structural barriers to information access that otherwise would have limited their opportunities of access to the scholarships. The Turkish scholarship body, through direct engagement with the scholars and other government agencies in popularizing the scholarship opportunities, has emerged as a key enhancer of this scholarship accessibility. Generally, critical to students' accessibility scholarship is the pre-conditional English proficiency requirements. This scholarship however does not demand this, hence encouraging many African students who may not beforehand have registered and taken such tests based on their costs and requirements to apply. Disproportionate access to the internet also affects the accessibility of this scholarship, especially for graduates and undergraduates based on their levels of familiarity and use of networks. This paper however has only looked at African students in general and there might be need to conduct further research on African students from particular countries in a comparative manner to contribute to the dynamics of the level of state development and student mobility. In summary, students' agency aided by the use of internet plays a key role in their access to Turkish scholarships which eventually re-invent their hopes to achieve both their educational goals and career ambitions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. <https://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/en/english-home/>
2. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats

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