

Trading or Sharing – Emerging opportunities and challenges for Cross Border Higher Education in East Africa

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Introduction

The rapid increase in internalization of higher education has resulted in significant changes in the knowledge economy and ushered in new forms of provision of educational services. Cross border higher education refers to a wide range of educational activities that are part of international academic linkages and agreements, international development/aid projects or international commercial trade initiatives (Knight, 2004). It is characterized by the movement of across national borders of students and teachers as well as providing institutions with a wide range of curricula and programmes using a variety of modes that have a transnational character. It is synonymous with transnational higher education and /or borderless education.

UNESCO and the OECD in their Guidelines for quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education state that Cross-border higher education includes higher education that takes place when students follow a course or programme of study that has been produced, and is continuing to be maintained, in a country different from the one in which they are residing. It may include higher education by private and/or for-profit providers.

The Guidelines identify and address six stakeholders in higher education that have a role to play in the provision of cross-border higher education, namely the government, Higher education institutions, Student bodies, Quality assurance and accreditation bodies, Academic recognition bodies and Professional bodies. Each of these bodies has a role to play in the great debate as to whether transnational higher education should be collaborative or competitive. Whichever approach is taken by them, it is still clear that they will be major implementation agents of any partnerships among institutions of higher learning, even within the East African region.

Borderless supply focuses on the service crossing the border, which does not require the consumer or service provider to physically move. Examples in higher education include distance education and eLearning.

Cross border higher education can take two main approaches:

Firstly, there is the collaboration and partnership approach where the countries, by means of the higher education agencies collaborate with each other in order to promote cooperation. This approach is implemented by encouraging the mobility of students, academics, programmes and institutions in other countries in order to build a better – educated citizenry, without over – straining their limited domestic resources.

Secondly, there is the competition and commercialization approach which emphasizes higher education as a trade commodity that should respond to market forces of demand and supply. As part of this approach, Vice Chancellors of Institutions of Higher learning are encouraged to see themselves less as implementers of national educational policies that have trickled down from their Ministries of Education and more as managers of multimillion business enterprises. This would necessarily mean that they would have to devise business plans and management actions as well as mobilize their teams of managers to produce best possible performance in order to compete with other institutions.

The main way in which this approach has been propagated has been by countries opening up their own higher education institutions to accommodate students from other countries who are either qualified but cannot get places within their home countries due to inadequacies in infrastructural capacity, or want to get exposure to higher quality course provision. Indeed the focus here is trade in Higher Education services. The GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) recognizes this as trade, through distance education and the establishment of branch campuses. These are the forms of cross-border higher education that have created a polarized debate by raising fears of cultural imperialism and loss of sovereignty.

Need and opportunities for Cross-Border Higher Education in the East African context

In the 1970's, we witnessed the collapse of the East African Community, officially ending cooperation in key areas such as transport, posts and telecommunications. However, the Inter - University Council for East Africa continued to function, being sustained by the Universities themselves.

The signing of the Treaty re - establishing the East African Community on 30th November 1999 at Arusha, Tanzania, created an avenue through which opportunities for cross border higher education would be officially promoted within the East African signatory States.

The objectives of the Treaty are set out very clearly in Article 5 which makes provisions to develop policies and programmes that are aimed at widening and deepening cooperation among the Partner States in political, economic, social and cultural fields as well as in research and technology.

Education is a key area that has been identified within the Treaty. Chapter 16 of the Treaty sets out the various ways in which cooperation in the development of human resources, science and technology can be fostered. In particular, Article 102(1) provides that in order to meet the objectives of the Treaty the Partner States agreed to undertake concerted measures to foster cooperation in education and training within the Community. Article 102(2) sets out the particular ways in which the States shall cooperate in education and training.

There should be: coordination of human resources development policies and programmes, strengthening existing and establishing new common research

and training institutes and centers of excellence, cooperation in industrial training, development of common programmes as would promote the emergence of well trained personnel in all sectors relevant to the aims of the Community, harmonization of curricula, examination certification and accreditation of education and training institutes through joint action of their relevant national bodies, encouragement and support of student and teacher mobility within the Community and exchange of information and experience on issues common to the educational systems of the Partner States.

A point of interest is that the Treaty also requires the Partner States to encourage and support the participation of private sectors in the development of human resources through education and training. University education in East Africa is one of the services that have been the main domain of government or public institutions. Indeed, Public Universities in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania have operated within highly favorable and protected environments with their respective governments heavily subsidizing them. These institutions have enjoyed monopolies over the provision of higher education for students in their countries. However, the demand for quality higher education by qualified students is increasing and the public Universities have found it challenging to accommodate the numbers of these students.

One of the responses therefore, of this market opportunity in higher education in East Africa is the upsurge of private universities. The Treaty of the East African Community encouraging the participation of private sectors in the provision of education and training is not only a recognition of the fact that Public universities are not able to meet the ever increasing demand for higher education, but is also a direct response to the wave of liberalization in trade that has and continues to take place in the globalised market place. Therefore not only have private universities emerged to meet the demand but students find that there are other opportunities in other Universities outside of their national border to pursue their educational goals. University education which was one of the main services that was the main domain of Government or Public institutions is a sector that has been affected by global structural adjustment policies that promote liberalization.

The East African states are therefore increasingly seeing the need to liberalize their education policies to accommodate this global trend of cross-border education.

The role and importance of cross-border higher education in East Africa lies in the need to produce a highly skilled human workforce that will contribute in the development of this region. East Africa does not have enough tertiary institutions, or places in the already existing institutions and also staff to meet the domestic demand for higher education.

Cross –border Higher Education thus has a number of benefits in East Africa. It results in increased opportunities for nationals to access higher education (Magugula, 2005). The governments of East Africa do not have the capacity to provide higher education to all their qualifying candidates. This challenge has inspired the surfacing of cross border education.

Cross-border Higher Education promotes greater access to specific knowledge or skill-based education and training of scientists, civil servants, researchers, health care professionals, technicians, teachers in basic and secondary education and business leaders.

Cross-border Higher Education creates socio – economic, cultural and political alliance among the three East African countries that otherwise have different cultural and political orientations. This could be one of the factors behind Rwanda and Burundi being incorporated as the newest members of the East African community.

Cross border education also is an important tool for promoting professional diversity within East Africa. A recent study by the Association of Commonwealth Universities reported that academics felt very strongly that in order to enhance future collaboration amongst institutions of higher learning, opportunities which allowed them to build personal relationships with colleagues should be promoted strongly. This enhances mutual trust amongst academics and researchers and allows for the development of areas of specific expertise (Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2007).

Economically, cross border higher education is a strong income earner. Even if a cross-border education activity is seen to be non-commercial in purpose – for instance in the exchange of students or professors for a semester – there is still export value in a country's balance of payments from accommodation, living, travel expenses, and therefore are commercial implications. In East Africa, Uganda seems to have benefited the most from the income generated as a result of cross border higher education with the country receiving about 8-10 billion Uganda shillings in 2007 (Ongong'a, 2008).

Status of Cross-border Higher Education in East Africa

There is no doubt that there is a high level of interaction among the East African states when it comes to higher education. However, not much integration has been achieved. The states are in competition with each other for the number of students who are demanding higher education.

According to Ongon'ga, Senior Assistant Director of Education in Kenya, the two main factors that are taken into account by Kenyan students in deciding when and where to undertake their University studies are finances and course programmes. Many students opt to study in Uganda and Tanzania because the tuition fees are significantly lower than in Kenya. For example, in Tanzania and Uganda the fees per annum are about Kenya Shillings 60,000 which is affordable to many families. The main course that is popular in Tanzania is Law while in Uganda the main courses which are popular such as Law and Commerce. These courses are available to the students whose qualifications commence from a mean grade of C- (minus). In Kenya only those who have attained the mean grade of C+ (plus) are eligible in the first instance to join both Public and Private Universities. Those wanting to pursue courses like Medicine,

Engineering, Pharmacy and Law require mean grades of A- (minus) and above. Students who wish to pursue these courses but do not meet admission requirements often opt to pursue 'A' studies in Uganda or Tanzania.

Different universities are at different levels of cross-border education. In Kenya for example the United States International University (USIU which is one of the oldest private Universities in Nairobi has a student population of about 4,200. Out of this the number of international students is 480 from 40 different nationalities. Of these, 16.7 per cent are from Tanzania, 15.2 per cent are from Uganda (Admissions Office, USIU). At USIU, two-thirds of the students choose to pursue the International Bachelor of Business Administration course. The International Relations course is also very popular.

This University has not opened up campuses in other areas in East Africa as they believe this may compromise quality. Their approach to cross-border education is that of partnerships and collaboration.

At the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 41.4 per cent of the Masters of Education students registered in the 2006/2007 academic year were from outside Kenya. In the 2007/2008 academic year, 34.8 per cent of the students registered for the same course were from outside Kenya (CUEA Admissions office). This University has a regional character in its mission to provide competent and upright leaders for Eastern Africa (that is Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Malawi and Zambia). But it also attracts students from the other countries in Africa.

Strathmore University, another private University within Nairobi in Kenya, has taken some steps in materializing the cross border element of higher education. It's Business School has had a distance learning programme for about 15 years. The courses offered within the programme are Certified Public Account course and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants course. The programme has attracted several students from Uganda and Tanzania. Between the periods of 2002 to 2008 the CPA course attracted 18 students from Uganda. The ACCA course which began in 2007 has attracted 70 students from Tanzania. Staff teaching the ACCA course are enabled to travel to Tanzania to carry out revision classes with the students.

Challenges faced in the provision of cross-border Higher Education in East Africa

Because Kenya follows an 8-4-4 system while Tanzania and Uganda follow a 7-4-2-3 system of education, public universities in Uganda require that the Kenyan candidates undergo A – level studies for 2 years while the private universities insist on a 6-9 months bridging course before candidates can join the institutions.

In Tanzania, the Kenyan and Ugandan students have to sit for the Matriculation examination and this has resulted in fewer foreign students going to study in Tanzania.

Another challenge is the evaluation of the credentials of international students. With the mushrooming of new and private institutions admitting many foreign students, vetting students' credentials is not easy and quality is thus not assured. Regulating of these many institutions is made even more difficult by their numbers as well as the lack of adequate staff and logistical policies as to how to carry out inspections and evaluations. There is also lack of harmonized means of accreditation of institutions of higher learning within the region.

The market approach of cross-border higher education, with its emphasis on maximizing profits and minimizing costs, has made universities to concentrate on offering courses with high market demand. Even though less popular and more costly courses might be crucial for social-economic and political development, they are likely to become the responsibility of public/non-profit institutions (Knight, 2004). This split will invariably lead to a differentiated discipline-based menu for programmes and courses for foreign and for profit providers and for the non-profit providers.

In addition to differences in educational priorities, another challenge is that foreign and private for-profit providers of cross-border higher education do not necessarily share the same cultural values of each of the individual countries. Cross border higher education might then become a tool for eroding national cultural identities.

There is also the challenge of developing countries being flooded with foreign and private providers delivering essentially profitable subjects and in these areas they will pose a serious competition to local universities, leaving the latter to deal with "non-profitable" subjects in arts, humanities, science and technology, so vital for a country's development. This is a result of heavy investment in terms of qualified human resources, equipment and facilities, that must go into these so called "not profitable" subjects.

In addition, other pertinent issues and challenges exist in the provision of cross border Higher Education in East Africa, with its diversity in culture, economic status and educational policy issues.

New Approach to Cross-Border Education

For cross-border provision to help East African citizens, it needs a new approach that addresses accessibility, affordability and availability as well as policy issues.

1. **Accessibility:** There is notable decrease in public/government spending on public universities and increased demand which has brought in a number of providers. This implies the poor cannot easily access higher education. In East Africa with large proportion of the population living on less than one dollar a day, education generally is unaffordable to them.

Access to higher education also requires access to technology and allied infrastructure through which education is delivered. Only a very limited population of people in this region is online. Electronic delivery could transform cross border Higher Education. New technologies required for cross-

border education in terms of expanded connectivity and free open source software should be looked into. In other words eLearning could be a response to this problem.

2. **Affordability:** Costs are a major deterrent. Low cost, high quality and need-based education can reach out to the millions that live below the poverty line but still aspire to education and training for a better future. Costs are critical in developing economies and cross-border providers must address that challenge. To succeed cross-border providers must devise a business model that can take them beyond the elite to reach out to the masses. A good example is the case of African Virtual University which initially was expensive but became affordable and registered expansion in enrolment after creating partnerships with local universities.

3. Important issues of concern to stakeholders

Of common concern is the fear that public domestic provision of higher education may be determined by foreign competition and education policy objectives may be at risk.

It is also believed that trade, coupled with commercialization and commodification of higher education, will put more importance on economic benefits than on the academic, social, scientific and cultural contributions of higher education in society.

It is suggested that increased trade by for-profit providers using new delivery methods may jeopardize consumer confidence and public trust in the quality of higher education. It is also important to be alert to public opinion and confidence in public/private higher education institutions that are active in trade of education services.

Higher education is seen to be different from other service sectors due to the public mandate and the role of government.

Way Forward

This paper began by setting the socio – economic and political context in which the East African states operate and partner with each other – by way of the Treaty establishing the East African Community. It is clear that what is envisaged as an ideal community is where the partner states are collaborating with each other rather than competing with each other in the provision and implementation of development programmes and services, education included.

If any competition should take place it should be with countries outside the region and internationally. Indeed one of the main challenges for higher education in East Africa is the development of the necessary capacity so as to participate effectively in the current global marketing of higher education.

In East Africa, as has been common in all other African states, collaboration in higher education has been with institutions in the North. Faculty (staff and

student) exchange programmes, collaborative teaching and research and joint conferences have been done with Universities in the North America, Europe and Asia. The different Universities within the region have not adequately and aggressively partnered or collaborated to derive the benefits of the strengths that each of them have.

There are different ways of collaborating at higher learning level which include, but are not limited to, the promotion of value adding activities that will enhance the passing on of knowledge, research and publications, sharing of methodologies in teaching and learning and also sharing of information on the different programmes that are being offered.

Teaching and academic staff can collaborate on research by sharing research resources and having joint publications. This would make dissemination of knowledge much easier, cheaper and wider.

Together with that there should be more staff and student exchange programmes within the States. Curricula and programmes that are geared to meeting intellectual and market needs rather than simply driven by cost effectiveness should be developed and certified by the States.

With the signing of the EAC Treaty, the Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) has been strengthened. The IUCEA has a major core function of promoting quality of higher education for common regional development. In this connection IUCEA endeavors to promote the development and application of a harmonized higher education quality assurance framework in order to ensure that teaching and research achieve and maintain international standards; and to advocate for and assist governments and other appropriate bodies and authorities with the development of strategies for achieving harmonization of higher education in East Africa. (IUCEA website).

The IUCEA set out a five year rolling strategic plan that was approved in September 2006 by the IUCEA governing board. The plan is for the period from 2006 to 2011. This strategic plan emphasizes the collaborative approach to higher education. The key points to note from the plan are:

- a) The optimization of the use of existing physical and human resources to build effective networks and partnerships.
- b) Enhancing support for academic mobility through student exchange programmes and staff fellowships and scholarships
- c) Establishing, managing and disseminating information on Higher Education in East Africa, managing online information resources for supporting member institutions in teaching, research and public services
- d) Facilitation of joint academic programmes. Solicitation of scholarships for staff development and promotion of subject meetings, conferences and publications
- e) Promotion of standardization and harmonization of academic programs as a regional strategy for training and research. This will modernize training, strengthen research and assist in the building of

research capacities of member universities. It is worth noting that funds have already been mobilized for regional research in strategic areas such as Environmental Management and HIV/AIDS.

- f) Development of an effective ICT policy to provide effective strategic support to member universities in their teaching and research. Already the IUCEA has developed ICT training programmes to promote the application of distance education, virtual learning in order to facilitate a regional approach and reduce bandwidth costs. With respect to the ICT policy, the IUCEA is developing a website that will enable members to share resources for example human expertise, facilities e.g. library holdings and laboratories, as well as information to students and teachers.
- g) Promotion of quality assurance through sharing best practice in partnership with national, regional and international bodies. The IUCEA has already developed a handbook on quality assurance in Higher Education in East Africa.

To this end government agencies should not operate and monopolize eLearning and other cross border programmes. The governments' role is to create the context in which they can flourish.

Conclusions

Cross border Higher Education in East Africa, to some extent, takes the collaboration and partnership approach. But as mentioned earlier, full integration of this approach has yet to take root as the Universities seem to be competing with each other in order to gain income.

In order to demonstrate their further commitment to partner and collaborate with each other the East African Higher Education regulatory agencies signed a memorandum of cooperation in Nairobi in July 2006, to streamline and harmonize accreditation and quality assurance practices and procedures in the region. Through such cooperation it is envisaged that the region will develop a vibrant, diverse and competitive higher education sector capable of producing human capital that is globally competitive. Cross border co-operation is not only valuable but an indispensable condition for the future of East Africa in a world of changing power blocks and developing market places.

To a large extent cross border higher education in East Africa takes the competition and commercialization approach. This has been done by countries opening up their higher education institutions to accommodate students from other countries. This is triggered by the high demand for higher education.

However the competition approach is beneficial and should be encouraged with the proper emphasis on the ideals, values and principles of quality cross border higher education rather than on mere profit-making and generation of revenue. Competition if well conducted has a number of other benefits as well such a provision of incentives for improvement and innovations; quality, efficiency and accountability in higher education; stimulation of broader vision and wider perception of market demand and thus influencing the nature of the 'products'

provided; teaching and learning are adjusted to cater for more effective modes and approaches; the research function of the institution of higher learning is emphasized more and more as a tool of education – research not only generates revenue for the institution but also adds to its fame abroad and thus attracts students from other jurisdictions; provision of more opportunities for students and the general public as a result of multiplication of choices for higher education. This leads to better equity in higher education; provision of opportunities (for example through distance learning) for people in remote areas of their countries who missed earlier chances in their lifetime of pursuing higher education; in being competitive new products are formulated to met the differentiated market demand.

Transnational or cross border higher educational arrangements must help reshape local institutions within East Africa so that they serve the human, social and economic development needs of the continent. In that way, their presence in any mode, whether competitive or collaborative continues to serve the “public good”.

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