

Research Application Summary

Enhancing internationalization and quality of African universities through academic mobility: Experiences from RUFORUM

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Abstract

Academic mobility is a globally accepted mechanism for internationalizing higher education and producing a globally competitive workforce. The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) has facilitated academic mobility in Africa since 2009 to strengthen capacity of African universities to build their own human resource. To date, 60 universities in Africa have committed to academic mobility through the RUFORUM Network. Capacity gaps in the agricultural sector were mapped and nine PhD and five MSc regionally accredited Programmes were developed. To date 521 student mobilities and 110 staff mobilities have been supported. Students and staff have benefited from exposure to diverse cultures and environments, created research networks through conferences, and are now working in different parts of the Continent. Universities are now exchanging staff to deliver guest lectures and build programmes for building capacity and internationalizing programmes. Success registered is attributable to institutional ownership of programmes by the Vice Chancellors, subsidized cost of training, regionally recognized curricula and a strong coordination mechanism. Challenges encountered included variation in curricula for mobilities beyond the nine programmes posing a challenge of recognition and equation of degrees. A majority of African universities lack organized logistical facilities such accommodation, language and cultural orientation support, visa processing and ticketing, office space etc. for visiting students and staff. Operationalization of a harmonized credit accumulation and transfer, subsidized fees, electronic and blended learning, strong international offices, institutional support and networking for lesson learning with an independent coordinating institution will enhance the contribution of academic mobility to improved quality of higher education in Africa.

Key words: Academic mobility, African universities, higher education; internationalization, quality assurance

Résumé

La mobilité académique est un mécanisme mondialement reconnu pour l'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur et la production d'une main-d'œuvre compétitive à l'échelle

mondiale. Le Forum des universités régionales pour le renforcement des capacités en agriculture (RUFORUM) a facilité la mobilité académique en Afrique depuis 2009 pour renforcer les capacités des universités africaines pour construire leurs propres ressources humaines. A ce jour, 60 universités en Afrique se sont engagées dans la mobilité académique à travers le réseau RUFORUM. Les déficits de capacité dans le secteur agricole ont été déterminés puis neuf et cinq programmes régionaux de Doctorat et Maîtrise, respectivement, ont été développés et accrédités. Aujourd’hui 521 mobilités étudiantes et 110 mobilités du personnel ont été prises en charge. Les étudiants et le personnel ont bénéficié de l’exposition aux diverses cultures et environnements, des réseaux de recherche ont été créés grâce à des conférences, et des travaux collectifs sont actuellement en cours dans différentes parties du continent. Les universités échangent maintenant le personnel pour la tenue des conférences et construire des programmes de renforcement des capacités, et l’internationalisation des programmes. Le succès enregistré est attribué à l’appropriation institutionnelle des programmes par les recteurs d’universités, le coût subventionné de la formation, les programmes régionaux reconnus, et un mécanisme de coordination solide. Les défis rencontrés comprenaient la variation dans les programmes d’enseignement pour les mobilités au-delà des neuf programmes qui posent un défi de la reconnaissance et de l’équivalence des diplômes. La majorité des universités africaines manquent moyens logistiques organisés tels que l’hébergement, le soutien dans l’apprentissage de la langue et l’orientation culturelle, l’octroi des visas et la billetterie, l’espace pour les bureaux pour les étudiants étrangers et les professeurs visiteurs. L’Opérationnalisation d’un système harmonisé d’accumulation et de transfert des crédits, la subvention des frais, l’apprentissage électronique et mixte, de solides bureaux d’affaires internationales, le soutien institutionnel et l’interconnexion pour le partage des expériences acquises avec une institution de coordination indépendante, permettront d’améliorer la contribution de la mobilité académique dans l’amélioration de la qualité de l’enseignement supérieur en Afrique.

Mots clés: la mobilité académique, les universités africaines, l’enseignement supérieur; l’internationalisation, l’assurance qualité

Introduction

Over the past decade, Africa has registered strong economic performance (with an average GDP growth of 4.5% per annum largely attributable to increased trade and investment in sectors such as agriculture, extractive industries, services, tourism, and health (IMF, 2015; World Bank, 2015). However, growth has not reduced poverty significantly, and food insecurity remains a strong concern. The sustainability of such rapid growth in Africa as well as the need to translate this growth to poverty reduction requires a greater application of knowledge for supporting science, technology and innovation in Africa. Higher education, through postgraduate training and more directly, research, is an important component of the science, technology and innovation nexus. Not only does Postgraduate training lead to scientific output by itself, but it also delivers the human resources that support the implementation of national strategies, plans and policies at key institutions, both public and private responsible for economic transformation and growth. Globalization has further highlighted the importance of internationalization of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the need to ensure national

competitiveness of institutions through sharing of knowledge and other resources across borders.

The need for accelerating postgraduate training in Africa. Postgraduate training in African institutions has been severely constrained by wider challenges within higher education institutions. The high enrollment of undergraduate students without proportionate increase in teaching personnel numbers has reduced the time allocation by staff at most universities towards research and outreach. HEIs also lack the requisite PhD quality staff that would support the recruitment and supervision of postgraduate student at most institutions. Scientific output can be directly correlated by the number of postgraduate students that an institution is able to graduate, with larger output for PhD students. Arguably, few institutions have the capacity to support meaningful PhD research at a desirable scale. This capacity has been further stretched by the growth in the number of HEIs in the region, while there has been no similar increase in PhD qualified staff. Part of the issues relate to funding. Funding for research remains limited, with available funds primarily from bilateral and multi-lateral programs funded by foreign governments and philanthropy organizations. With limited funding, African HEIs find themselves in the dilemma of how to enhance research output in support of development without adequate staffing; and at the sometime needing the research to train existing and potential future staff to support research at their institutions. The high cost of training at northern institutions cannot be the central component to the response strategy because of funding limitations, and inadequate appropriateness of research to local contexts, as well as the limited opportunity for strengthening staff capacity that would have accrued from local training. More importantly many students either do not come back to their countries after finishing their studies (Mpinganjira, 2011) or come only for a short period, before leaving due to poor incentive frameworks. A new approach is required to support the escalation of PhD and Masters training in the region that will ensure employment on the Continent but also staff African HEIs to enable them enhance their quality of training and linkages with development initiatives and programs.

Academic mobility and postgraduate training. Academic mobility in higher education has been accepted globally as a tool for internationalizing and enhancing quality of higher education, among other goals. Academic mobility generally refers to the movement of students and teachers in higher education to another institution inside or outside their own country to study, teach or conduct research for a specified period of time (Cradden, 2007; Byram and Dervin, 2008; Codina, 2013). It is an effort to create a common labor market space where people can be trained in one country and can work anywhere on the globe. It enables academics and students experience diversity of language, culture and environments, an important aspect in Africa due to the diversity of languages and culture, yet striving towards knowledge based economy with a freely mobile workforce. Various institutions and scholars have categorized mobility based on who is taking the mobility – staff and student mobility, period of the mobility and purpose or main activity in the mobility (Bourke, 2005; Cradden, 2007; Byram and Dervin, 2008; Codina, 2013). In this paper RUFORUM Academic Mobility will be categorized by purpose of the mobility. Academic mobility provides potential for enhancing quality of African higher education too. In 2007, the European ministers agreed that Mobility of staff, students and graduates is one of the core elements creating opportunities

for personal growth, developing international cooperation between individuals and institutions, enhancing the quality of higher education and research, and giving substance to the European dimension. In Africa, academic mobility will truly enhance the quality of higher education and internationalize it. However, Africa has diverse cultures, languages and political context. African countries have limited funding for higher education than for countries on other continents yet have limited academic freedom. Adaptation of mobility programmes from elsewhere should be informed by these practical issues in African Tertiary Education Institutions. Due to its network approach to capacity building, academic mobility has been adopted as a key component of strengthening member HEIs with the network of universities within the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) network.

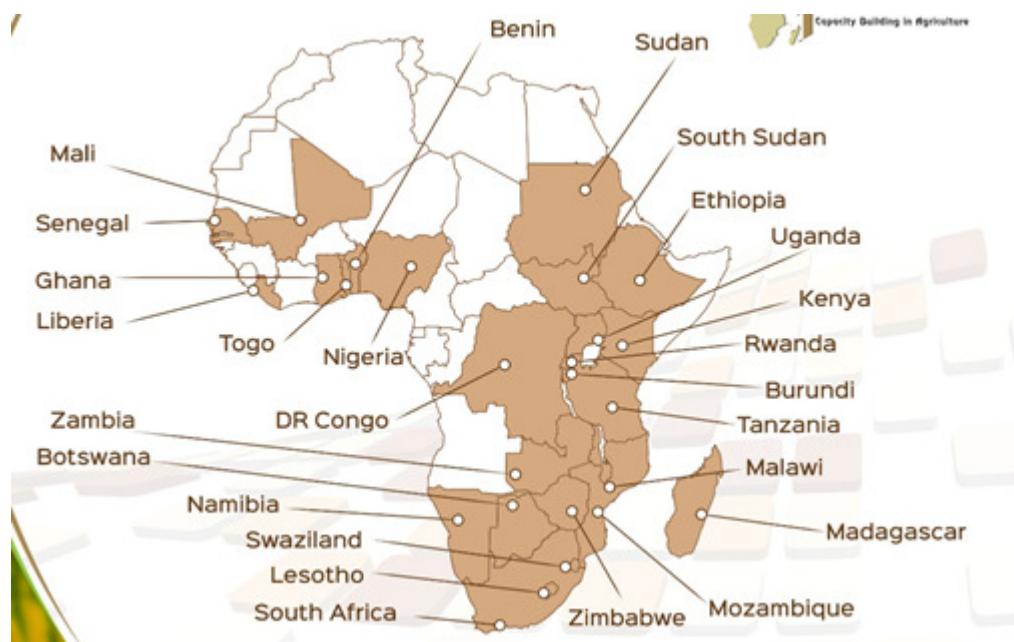
RUFORUM was created in 2004 by African Vice Chancellors to offer a platform to strengthen the capacities of universities to foster innovations responsive to the demands of small holder farmers through training of high quality researchers, impact oriented research outputs and maintenance of collaborative working relations among researchers, farmers, national agricultural research institutions, private sector, civil society institutions and governments. With membership today of 60 universities in 25 African countries, RUFORUM strives to support its members to benefit from capacity across the network and enhance benefits from economies of scope and scale in its activities.

RUFORUM Academic Mobility Programmes. RUFORUM initiated Regional Graduate training programmes whose main focus is to offer African doctoral candidates training alternatives through intra Africa academic mobility. The model for this mobility consists of recruitment and financial support of students from across Africa to study in other member universities located in an African country different from the applicant's native country, and faculty staff exchange to harness expertise across the continent, co-teach and co-supervise students in these programmes as well as learn from these training and research centers (Okori, 2015). This mobility is guided by a Memorandum of Understanding among member universities which stipulates that students enrolled in any of the Regional Training Programmes pays local fees, whereas tuition fees for students recruited under the "Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) programme are waived by the host institution. Intra Africa academic mobility provides African students with the option to study within an environment that is relevant to their own situations and enables them to carry out research which is directly beneficial to their own society. By providing them with the opportunity to study closer to home, they are also able to continue to contribute to their home institutions (Okori, 2015). As a result, the 2014 RUFORUM tracer study indicated that 97% of all RUFORUM PhD graduates are working within their countries and some 80% of them are engaged either in teaching in tertiary agricultural education institutions or working with research and development agencies (RUFORUM, 2014).

Enhanced Research Production and University Reputation. According to the 2010 Global Research Report, Africa's research publications is still very small compared to other continents (Adams *et al.*, 2010). Academic mobility programmes, in particular those supporting international collaborative research or training of researchers/research students,

have the potential to increase Africa's contribution to the body of knowledge worldwide through enhanced research output (Mpinganjira, 2011). Main avenues for Staff mobility at RUFORUM include attendance at academic conferences, postgraduate co-teaching, co-supervision and external examination, collaborative research and publishing, and joint proposal writing. Through these staff exchanges 9 PhD and 6 MSc programs established in Eastern and Southern Africa drawing over 521 graduate students from all over the Continent as shown in Figure 1. Staff were supported to conduct short trainings and research work in the member universities. Nine (9) Conferences were organized including five series of the RUFORUM Biennial Conferences and 4 series of the African Crop Science Society Conferences to convene scientists, students and non-university actors to review progress and develop proposals on enhancing academic mobility.

Promoting Social-Cultural Development of Students and Staff. Academic mobility promotes understanding of other cultures and languages; two essential qualities for modern citizens, many of whom work and live in highly multicultural settings (UNESCO, 2010). RUFORUM provides opportunities for its faculty and graduate students to network with regional and international professionals to give the former chances to connect with various mentors and collaborators, improve their confidence and readiness for the job market, and provide career opportunities.



Source: RUFORUM tracer study, 2014

Figure 1. Nationalities of students involved in RUFORUM mobility

Through its various convening events, beneficiaries cited several achievements, some of which include: soft skills enhancement trainings, students and staff's capacity to communicate and develop tolerance with people from different cultures, languages and scientific capacities was developed; and networks which have lived beyond the mobility periods were formed. Emerging academics benefited from mentorship from senior faculty during short visits while visiting professors supported host institutions to internationalize academic programmes through experience sharing. International institutional and individual research and linkages have been created for joint staff training, development of degree programmes, research project development and institutional leadership strengthening, and contributed to enhancing communities of practice across the network.

To date RUFORUM has supported the training of 281, MSc, 240 PhD students through its academic mobility exchange programme. In addition, 110 Academic and administrative staff exchanges have been facilitated.

Challenges and Lessons Learnt

Through RUFORUM's academic mobility programmes, diverse challenges have been encountered. Curricula in similar areas of study still vary across Africa posing a challenge of recognition and equation of degrees. This is making short mobilities undertaken especially for Masters difficult. To address this, operationalization of a harmonized credit accumulation and transfer is thus required in the continent. The second challenge is lack of organized logistical mechanisms and facilities such as accommodation, language and cultural orientation support, visa processing and ticketing, office space etc. for visiting students and staff which are prerequisites for successful delivery of technical work. These are largely done by host scientists who have limited time to handle such activities. Strengthening international Offices to house these facilities needs to be done. To further strengthen the role of the international Offices, buy-in of institutional leadership and networking for lesson learning is important. Quality Assurance, lesson learning and sharing remains a challenge for individual universities

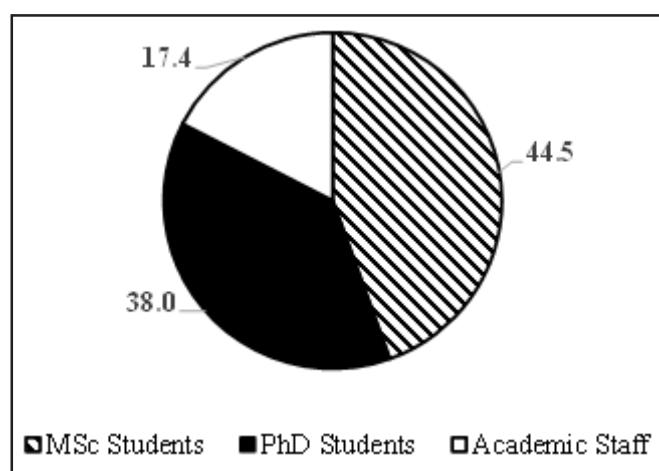


Figure 2. Distribution of RUFORUM academic mobility (%) of participants

(Materu, 2007; IUCEA, 2010; RUFORUM 2011). An independent coordinating institution is required to continuously scan the African academic mobility space, document lessons and share with African universities. The other challenge is that Visa restrictions still exist in some countries. Support from governments and Regional Economic Commissions and the African passport scheme would advance academic mobility to a higher level. To provide lessons and guide the universities, an independent coordinating institution is required.

Key Success Factors for RUFORUM Academic Mobility Programmes

It became evident from the RUFORUM experience that for mobility programmes to be successful, logistical mechanisms, infrastructure and a common framework to guide credit transfer and equation of degrees need to be well-defined (Cradden, 2007; Eurostat, 2009). This is evident in Europe where programmes such as Erasmus series to operationalize the Bologna process have registered great success (Bourke, 2005; Eurostat, 2009). The success of the RUFORUM academic mobility is attributable to institutional ownership, subsidized cost of training, and harmonized quality assurance. The Vice Chancellors, Principals and Deans were engaged from design to implementation and periodic review and evaluation of programmes hence smooth implementation. All international students under the mobility programmes pay local fees as outlined in the RUFORUM Memorandum of understanding. The international nature of Regional Training Programmes curricula reduced the challenge of degree equivalence in Eastern and Southern Africa. The facilitation of the RUFORUM Secretariat enabled continental scanning and lessons sharing and providing feedback to individual institutions. A Quality Assurance Mechanism and Credit Accumulation and Transfer System handbook was developed pending operationalization across the Network (RUFORUM, 2011).

Conclusion

Academic mobility provides an enormous potential in enhancing the quality and access to African higher education. It provides opportunity for capacity building for students, staff and researchers through mentorship, co-supervision. It also builds confidence of researchers and students to train and work in any part of the continent through networks created and exposure to diverse culture and languages. Creation of institutional linkages are opportunities for internationalization of programmes and sharing of faculty to teach and supervise students as well building administrative capacity. Subsidized fees and virtual mobility through e-learning and blended learning would increase knowledge sharing. However, African institutions still requires substantial financial investments in academic mobility and operational mechanisms and facilities for enabling academic mobility and internationalization of higher education in Africa.

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