

Challenges and Opportunities for Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education: The Case of East Africa

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to outline challenges and opportunities for quality assurance of cross-border higher education in East Africa. It is established that besides providing nations with a range of benefits and opportunities, cross-border higher education may threaten the provision of quality higher education in a number of ways. For example, cross-border higher education tends to cater to an affluent market and despite the high cost of their offerings their quality is often disputed. This study argues for the necessity of countries to collaborate in provision and regulation of higher education. Advancements in science and technology, among others, accelerate the paradigm shift from restrictive conventional higher education to a borderless educational provision. As such, higher education provided across East African countries ought to be in compliance with other international guidelines and standards in order to prepare globally competitive individuals.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, cross-border higher education, globalization, East Africa

INTRODUCTION

The interest in cross-border higher education is growing in many countries due to a number of factors. These factors include changes in composition of student population and student mobility (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004); staff and program mobility; long distance educational delivery (Chetro-Szivos, 2010) and the global trend of massification of higher education. Other forces behind the significance of cross-border higher education are the nations' increasing awareness on the role that cross-border higher education can play in building national capacity and enhancing regional and global collaborations (Moore & Lambert, 1996); increased demand for higher and continuing education; and the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in delivering education (Kim, Kim & Ahn, 2010).

Many higher education institutions consider cross-border higher education as a strategic approach to cultivate collaborations, assisting receiving nations in human resource development, generating revenue and responding to the global demand for an educated workforce and a globalized society (Chetro-Szivos, 2010). Besides being an opportunity for both receiving and providing nations, cross-border higher education poses several challenges to the education sector. Due to nations' incapacity to satisfy the educational demands of all students there is a general belief that various forms of cross-border higher education can offer better opportunities for improving the skills and competencies of students from the

receiving country (Vincent-Lancrin & Pfothenauer, 2012). For instance, while exporting institutions and nations gain from expanding student enrolment and income through tuition fees, importing nations benefit by supplementing the domestic supply of education and they gain an educational alternative for their population (Sum, 2005). On the other hand, a significant challenge in program mobility is who awards the course credits or final credential for the program. Perhaps more importantly is whether the qualifications are credible for employment or lifelong learning in the receiving country and elsewhere.

In East Africa, the re-establishment of the East African Community on 30th November, 1999 created an opportunity through which cross-border higher education would be more officially promoted and executed within the signatory countries. It is convincingly declared by Maviiri (2006) that although there is a high level of interaction among the East African countries in terms of higher education, they still need more rigorous collaboration among themselves. Besides the campus public universities, Maviiri further implicitly affirms that, liberalization and globalization have compelled these countries to promote the role of private universities and distance education to meet the rapidly growing demand for higher education. Of course, this is a global trend.

This paper presents a few challenges and opportunities for quality assurance of cross-border higher education in East Africa. Results are drawn from a qualitative case study focusing on three

selected countries in East Africa: Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. We must admit that cross-border higher education in East Africa is still at its infancy stage. As a result, it is a serious challenge to find any useful statistics on the state of cross-border higher education in any of these three countries. While providing insights on the challenges and opportunities of cross-border higher education, this study is expected to provoke the educators' and researchers' interests in this *borderless* educational delivery from East Africa and elsewhere.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

The main objectives of this study were to:

- i. analyze quality assurance guidelines and systems for higher education in East Africa,
- ii. discuss the potential challenges for the effective implementation of regional quality assurance of cross-border higher education.
- iii. outline the opportunities available for implementing effective regional quality assurance of cross-border higher education in East Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-Border Higher Education

Cross-border higher education includes higher education that takes place when students follow a course or program of study that has been produced, and is continuing to be maintained, in a country different from the one in which they are dwelling (Uvalic-Trumbic, 2008). *Transnational education* and *borderless education* two common synonyms for cross-border education. Knight (2007) suggests some reasons for emergence of cross-border higher education such as changing demographics among nations; substantial growth of student population worldwide; movement to lifelong learning and the expansion of knowledge economy.

We concur with Uvalic-Trumbic (2008) in asserting that cross-border higher education is just one manifestation of globalization. This consideration is probably easily comprehended when we accept the reality that national sovereignty over higher education has been reinforced by the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization. Thus higher education has been closely aligned with business and economic development of nations. At this juncture, we are prompted to question on whether higher education institutions (including cross-border education providers) will persist on preserving their missions and visions to execute their basic functions.

The growth of cross-border higher education in East Africa is accelerated by many factors such as massification of higher education (Sanga, 2012) and, as explicated in Vincent-Lancrin & Pfothenauer (2012) and elsewhere, the inability of national systems to offer educational opportunities to all and

the global demand for internationally acceptable competencies (knowledge-based and technology-driven economies) escalate the need for relevant competencies. Although it helps in capacity building, human resource development, achieving practical and relevant education and professional training, cross-border higher education can be viewed as one political strategy and economic device towards educational internationalization and cooperation.

Benefits and Threats of Cross-Border Higher Education

The cooperating institutions, teaching staff and students benefit the cross-fertilization of knowledge, skills and cultures thereby fostering human understanding and manpower across borders. It boosts national educational demands to attain an international dimension of research and teaching hence institutional quality improvement. Njuguna and Itegi (2013) accurately comment that such regional networks give countries strength to compete on a global arena. This is particularly important in this globalization era when we witness African countries are deeply engaged in pursuing Western type of development, sometimes without consideration of their local contexts.

Cross-border higher education creates opportunities for knowledge and technology exchange and transfer and the promise to penetrate new markets, but also stimulates competition for scarce resources especially human capital. However, the practicality of knowledge and technology exchange is usually disturbing due to the inequalities that are likely to emerge between partners. In this situation the role of governments becomes imperative in providing the necessary structures and procedures that harmonize and strengthen international bonds.

Cross-border higher education has several threats both to the provider and receiver. For instance, although it is generally claimed that cross-border higher education offers an opportunity for a choice of high quality courses, deep inequalities tend to exist between the participating countries. Few countries may dominate the global scientific system and unfortunately new technologies are basically owned by multinational academic institutions from major developed countries making most of East African countries dependent on major academic super powers.

Absence of regional assessment and accreditation mechanism imposes quality risks such as selling and buying of fake degrees which educe a negative impression of cross-border education. It is against such situations that some institutions decide to introduce courses both online and compulsory attendance mode for distance learners.

Quality Assurance for Higher Education in East Africa

Each university in East Africa has some sort of quality assurance mechanism in the form of regulations and criteria of academic staff recruitment and appraisal, rules and regulations on academic activity performance, student evaluations of course delivery, stakeholder involvement in the curriculum review process, external examination systems, and academic auditing as conducted by some universities (Nkunya, 2008). Individual universities having their quality assurance mechanisms notwithstanding, there are national educational quality assurance agencies for each country.

At the university level, the first accreditation agency in Africa was the Kenya's Commission for Higher Education established in 1985 by an Act of Parliament, the Universities Act Cap 210B. This commission started as a result of public concerns about the quality of higher education and the existence of several institutions offering "university education whose establishment and development was uncoordinated and unregulated . . ." (Hayward, 2006: 12). Among its functions were accreditation and inspection of institutions of higher education. The real accreditation process began in 1989 in Kenya only for private universities. Among the first to be accredited was the Catholic University of East Africa. Accreditation in Kenya is now required of private universities, public universities other than those established by an Act of Parliament, foreign universities, and any other agency operating on behalf of any of those institutions. The Commission for Higher Education is concerned with quality assurance of both conventional and distance higher education in Kenya.

In Tanzania, the Higher Education Accreditation Council which had been in operation since 1995 was then succeeded by the Tanzania Commission for Universities beginning on July 1, 2005. Previously, all universities and non-university higher education institutions implemented their obligatory functions as set forth in their individual Acts of Parliament or constitutions including the development of internal quality assurance systems. Thus, Tanzania Commission for Universities is entrusted to recognize, approve, register, and accredit universities and university colleges (both conventional and distance modes of delivery) operating in Tanzania and local or foreign university-level programs being offered by non registered higher education institutions (Tanzania Commission for Universities, 2010). This commission also coordinates the proper functioning of all university institutions in Tanzania so as to foster a harmonized higher education system in the country. In order to ensure that such a harmonious higher education system does not compromise institutional peculiarities and autonomy,

each university has the legal right to operate under its own charter.

Uganda, having realized the truth that global forces are transforming the way higher education is being delivered, sought to set up a regulatory body for higher education. Thus, to regulate higher education and guide the establishment of institutions of higher learning as well as ensure that quality and relevant education is delivered, the National Council for Higher Education was established in 2005 by an Act of Parliament (National Council for Higher Education, 2007; 2008). This is a semi-autonomous and self-accounting body. The core mission of this agency is to set standards and regulations to ensure that all public and private tertiary education institutions in Uganda create, sustain, and provide relevant and quality higher education for all qualified Ugandans and to meet the local and global higher education challenges of the future.

METHODOLOGY

While the new East African Community consists of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, East Africa in this paper refers to Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. These three countries are selected on the basis that they are the members of the formerly dissolved East African Community. Further, these are the countries with the most well established and coordinated higher education systems within the Community. This study provides findings drawn predominantly from the qualitative review and partially content analysis of selected documents. Duane (1996) posits that review of documents is particularly useful when we want to figure out the impact of program or phenomenon operating in the organization or country. Policy documents, memos and reports from the Commission for Higher Education (Kenya), Tanzania Commission for Universities (Tanzania), and National Council for Higher Education (Uganda) were reviewed. In addition, books, peer reviewed articles and standard newspapers were reviewed.

Selection of these documents was primarily based on these factors: the internal and external coherence to the study, correspondence between theory and data, the fruitfulness of the data, and the trustworthiness of the sources for professional credibility (Gall, M., Gall, J., & Borg, 2003). The reporting of findings was based on the three objectives of this study.

FINDINGS

Guidelines for Quality Assessment in East Africa

Like many other places around the world, the guidelines for quality assurance as stipulated by the Tanzania Commission for Universities, the Commission for Higher Education of Kenya, and the National Council for Higher Education of Uganda provide evidence of many similarities. For example,

Vincent-Lancrin & Pfothenauer's (2012) study: *Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education: where do we stand?* which incorporated Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and few non-OECD countries contains a similar conclusion. The study concluded that there is a high level of compliance with the guidelines of OECD recommendations, especially among OECD member countries.

The following table (Table 1) portrays that, in general, the higher education quality assurance agencies in these three countries insist on similar core standards and indicators for quality assurance. Nevertheless, there are few standards and guidelines which seem to be unique to each country. For instance, while the National Council for Higher Education of Uganda specifies physical resources, the Commission for Higher Education of Kenya and Tanzania Commission for Universities stipulate facilities in general. Further, Tanzania Commission for Universities highlights the campus size as a separate issue which counts when assessing quality of higher education. Understandably, campus size may be an issue of concern for conventional and dual modes of delivery but not necessarily a factor to consider for cross-border educational delivery.

Table 1. Components of institutional quality assurance guidelines

Kenya [Commission for Higher Education]	Tanzania [Tanzania Commission for Universities]	Uganda [National Council for Higher Education]
Institutional mission and vision	Institutional objectives, mission and vision	Institutional objectives, mission and vision
Institutional governance	Institutional governance	Institutional governance
Academic character	Academic orientation	Academic orientation
Academic programs	Curricular on offer	Quality of teaching and learning
Human resources	Academic staff	Academic freedom
Library services	Facilities	Facilities
Planning schedule	Strategic planning	Strategic plan
Financial resources	Finance and budgeting	Financial management

Source: Compiled from Commission for Higher Education (2008); National Council for Higher Education (2008); Tanzania Commission for Universities (2010); and OECD (2004).

Challenges for Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education in East Africa

Establishing and managing quality assurance for both incoming and outgoing education programmes is not an easy task. Despite the strengths of mutual collaboration for provision and quality assurance of

higher education, East African countries face a number of challenges some of which are summarized hereunder.

New technologies have been influential in increasing accessibility to education and have opened new avenues for cross-border education. Due to advancements in Information Communication and Technology (ICT) partnership in providing and managing quality higher education is sometimes regarded as irrelevant. In addition, East African countries have different ICT policies and they certainly differ in the levels at which they apply technology in education. These differences may have some implication on the extent of harnessing the benefits of cross-border higher education.

Agencies of quality assurance in East African countries do not explicitly delineate the roles to be played by, for instance, the national governments, student bodies, professional and academic bodies as outlined in other international guidelines and standards such as OECD and UNESCO's (2005) joint guideline on provision of cross-border higher education. This is a challenge because quality assurance of education is a shared responsibility of many stakeholders ranging from student bodies to national governments. As depicted on Table 1 above, the guidelines extracted from the respective countries quality assurance agencies are not only too simplistic but also vague.

Despite the similarities that exist in many aspects, the general education systems and national educational philosophies of the three countries are different in certain fundamental aspects. For example, Tanzania and Uganda follow a 7-4-2-3 system in which there are 7 years of primary education, 6 years of secondary education (divided into 4 years of ordinary or lower secondary and 2 years of advanced or upper secondary school), and at least 3 years for higher education, whereas Kenya follows an 8-4-4 system, that is 8 years of primary, 4 years of secondary and at least 4 years of higher education. These differences have a direct repercussion on student exchange across these countries. In some cases students are compelled to do either a bridging program or a matriculation examination before they are admitted for university studies in a neighbouring country. Under these circumstances, quality of education may mean different things to different institutions and partner countries.

Njuguna & Itegi (2013) point out that in some cases institutions and governments are worried that student mobility and foreign education could lead to displacement of local students by international students. Moreover, most students seeking cross-border higher education are privately sponsored implying that students from poor economic

backgrounds are likely to have poor access to cross border higher education. Hence, cross-border higher education in East African context remains to be the privilege of those who can afford.

The incongruity of national quality assurance systems among themselves on one hand and the regional quality assurance system on the other is another challenge. As an illustration, Kenya's Commission for Higher Education quite clearly explicates the standards (provider's commitment, design of curriculum, instruction, and course materials, development, staff support, student support, evaluation and assessment, and advertising) and procedures for quality assurance of Open and Distance Learning programs (CHE, 2008) while Tanzania's and Uganda's agencies are silent about it. Tanzania and Uganda apply the same procedures and standards for both conventional and open and distance learning programs.

Autonomy and the powers of national accrediting agencies are not uniform across these countries. There is a notable proximity between universities and national structures of power which in East African situations has tended to curtail academic freedom and intellectual expansion among students and staff. There are several cases of serious government encroachment on university recruitment and renewal of professors' contracts, university budgets, and institutions' procedures in general. Although the governments are gradually withdrawing from supporting higher education, their political influence on management of higher education is still notable.

Cheating and unreliability of data about programs and institutional activities among member institutions happen in certain cases. This challenge is in line with Sum's (2005) view that higher education institutions are likely to provide exaggerated information about, for example, course/program content and their delivery and claims on the local recognition of the same. Arguably, pressure from ranking system of universities and advocacy for global competition are among the accelerating factors for the provision of exaggerated data.

Liberalization policies of education have resulted into a rapid proliferation of higher education institutions, especially the private ones. Nations are witnessing a huge increase in launching of universities and transformation of existing colleges into universities. From our perspective, some of these institutions are apparently not worth of the name university. Coupled with massification of students that surpasses infrastructure, effective management of higher education is definitely at crossroads. The problem of degree mills has become one critical concern of higher education quality assurance agencies in East African countries.

Opportunities for Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education in East Africa

Quality assurance of cross-border higher education by single-country initiatives is clearly cumbersome unless combined efforts from neighbouring countries are considered. Notwithstanding the discussed challenges, East African countries have certain opportunities which if wisely tapped, the quality of received and provided cross-border higher education will be guaranteed.

In 2006, the three East African higher education regulatory agencies: Kenya's Commission for Higher Education, the National Council for Higher Education in Uganda and Tanzania's Commission for Universities signed a memorandum of cooperation in a bid to streamline and harmonize higher education accreditation, quality assurance practices and procedures in the region (Buchere, 2009). A harmonized quality assurance system for East Africa, currently being developed, would help ensure the standards and comparability of cross-border higher education among member countries. Successful development of an East African Quality Assurance Framework will be a yardstick to ensure that university graduates in member countries attained the skills and competencies needed to be relevant to and competitive for jobs in the region and globally.

The recent political will of the government leaders of East African countries to invigorate a strong East African Community is a great opportunity to expand cooperation in political, economic, socio-cultural, and, of course, educational sectors. Following this revival of East African Community many higher education institutions are intensifying more their ties across the region. This is a unique opportunity for higher education institutions to work together and sustain their role as think tanks within the region. More significantly, some top government leaders and educational experts have been passionately advocating on the need for a harmonized system of provision and control of higher education in East Africa.

The most prominent public universities of East African countries (Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Makerere in Uganda and Nairobi in Kenya) have a long, shared and rich history. With their common history and multiple perspectives they can share their knowledge to address the regional educational issues with the greatest amount of a collective voice. These prominent universities have the potential to provide leadership in offering high quality higher education at lower cost and less 'restrictive residency model' (Chetro-Szivos, 2010) to promote cross-border higher education within the East African region. We believe the public institutions deserve to assume the leadership role despite the growing importance of the

role of private higher education institutions in this region.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

Several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. The most important limitation lies in the fact that despite many researches being conducted on the topic of higher education in East Africa, prior research studies on the topic of cross-border higher education are missing. As a result, while the statistics revealing the numbers of students moving in-and-out of the selected countries would be useful, no single document reviewed contained any meaningful statistical data. In addition, more robust primary data could be extracted from national educational policy makers and officials from the three national quality assurance agencies if in-depth interviews were to be conducted. Nevertheless, these limitations could not hamper the methodology employed in this study to achieve the three aforesaid objectives.

CONCLUSION

The global trend of higher education program and student mobility signifies the reality that provision of cross-border higher education programs is increasingly becoming imperative in East Africa. Cross-border higher education has the potential to help countries provide accessible and affordable higher education to their citizens. In reality, however, cross-border higher education is making a negligible contribution to the provision of accessible and affordable higher education. The main limitations to the effectiveness of cross-border higher education include: low level of technology used in delivery of education, poor and inadequate infrastructure and ineffective national government policies and priorities.

Whether cross-border higher education providers are viewed as competitors or collaborators, or as opportunities or risks, depends on a country's ability to develop appropriate policies and regulations to integrate foreign providers into a national higher education system which is capable of meeting national social, cultural, and economic goals. Member institutions and countries need to realize that, despite their many similarities, the goals of higher education and quality assurance systems should be relevant to respective country's circumstances.

Equally significant, quality assurance of cross-border higher education in East Africa has to be assessed to determine the scope of compliance with other international guidelines and standards such as those stipulated by OECD and UNESCO. This is imperative because globalization pressure poses 'a paradox of cooperation and competition' (Sanga 2012, 14). The crucial challenging task for institutional and national educational leaders,

therefore, is to strike the balance between the need for cooperation and competition among their respective institutions and nations.

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