

Full Length Research Paper

A glimpse of challenges and benefits associated with collaborative postgraduate programmes in Sub-Saharan African Universities

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The paper presents empirical findings on the potential benefits and challenges associated with collaborative postgraduate programs between African universities. It reflects the empirical benefits and challenges towards a collaborative master in the fields of Earth Observation, Geographical Information Science (GIS) and Remote Sensing. The research applied a combination of approaches that include desktop study, consultative meetings and round table meetings with experts in universities operating partnership. Positive and negative effects of collaborative degree programs were equally collected and the results were verified. The research established that although collaborative degree programs are more favorable around the world, a number of administrative issues hamper the system. These are lack of funding and inconsistent accreditations among country universities. Key recommendations include inclusive administration, proper funding for higher institutions and consistent accreditations among universities. This paper presents a glimpse of the challenges and benefits associated with collaborative postgraduate programs between African universities'.

Key words: Collaborative degree programs, challenges, benefits, universities, Namibia; Sub-Sahara Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative degree programs have become a popular form of higher education internationalization around the world. However, there still complex challenges to full implementation. National and international organizations, higher education associations, and funding agencies have undertaken efforts to study the dynamics and frameworks of collaborative degree programs, both joint and double degree programs, in their particular contexts. Some of these efforts have culminated in full-fledged studies, some have led to the formulation of best

practices, and yet others have produced overviews that assess specific regional or national collaborative degree landscapes (Kuder et al., 2013). This paper presents empirical findings on the challenges and benefits associated with collaborative postgraduate degree programs in higher education.

The study area is Sub-Saharan Africa, as depicted on Figure 1, with practical inputs gathered from Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Botswana and Angola. Africa is the world's second-largest and second-most-populous

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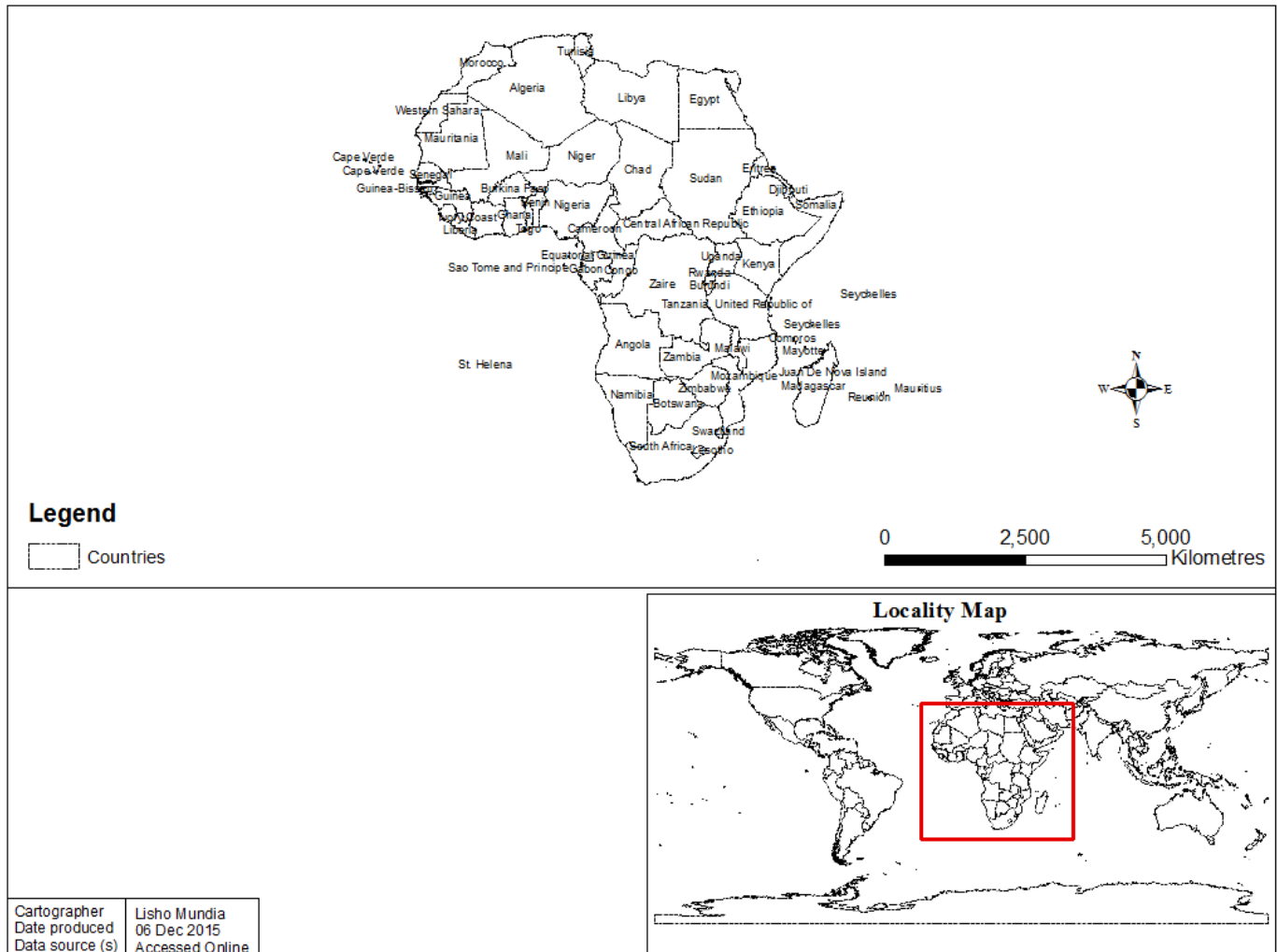


Figure 1. Study area.

continent. University enrolment rates in sub-Saharan Africa are among the lowest in the world, averaging 5%. The correlation between university enrolment rates and national income is strong. No high-income country (other than Switzerland) has university enrolment less than 50%.

Recent graduates of universities all over Africa, surveyed in 2006, described exploding demand for higher education in most African countries, with overflowing classrooms and families pooling money to send one child to college. Rising demand means that students come from a wide range of family backgrounds and incomes. Universities in Africa, as anywhere, can be engines of social mobility.

Just over 30 million square kilometers including adjacent islands cover six percent of earth's total surface area and 20.4% of its total land area. Africa accounts for about 15% of the world human population with 1.1 billion people as of 2013. The continent is surrounded by the

Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea along the Sinai Peninsula to the northeast, the Indian Ocean to the southeast, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The continent includes Madagascar and various archipelagos. It has 54 fully recognized sovereign states (countries), nine territories and 2 de facto independent states with limit or no recognition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing number of international associations, including the International Association of Universities, now includes collaborative degree programs in their frequent efforts to map internationalization (International Association of Universities, 2010; cited in Kuder et al., 2013). Increasing interest in collaborative degree programs is also seen on the agendas of international

higher education conferences, working groups, and expert seminars specifically devoted to this format of internationalization.

These developments clearly illustrate the need for reflection on these complex forms of international collaboration. Kuder et al. (2013) formulate a plea for a more strategic approach to developing joint and double degree programs. Addressing a selected set of challenges, they argued that they often result from a mix of unbalanced expectations and underdeveloped institutional policies.

Several North-South initiatives focus on the development of higher education and research partnerships. Examples are the European Commission's cooperation programs, such as the Erasmus Mundus external cooperation window, which aims to build capacity in the area of establishing and managing international partnerships and increasing student and staff mobility between the European Union (EU) and the South. Another example is the European Commission's Alpha Program, which helps to develop partnerships between EU and Latin American higher education institutions.

International organizations, such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Bank are also major players in the development and internationalization of higher education in the South. Many nations, such as Ethiopia, have benefitted from World Bank funding in support of quality assurance initiatives, research projects, and the development of a national higher education strategy. In another example, UNESCO and the New Partnership for African Development, initiated in 2001 by five African Heads of State agreed to strengthen Africa's research capacity by establishing regional networks of up to 30 'centers of excellence' in science and technology in Africa by 2015 at a projected cost of USD 3 billion (Teferra and Knight, 2008). Many international organizations, including UNESCO's International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa, the Commonwealth of Learning and the African Development Bank are also running projects to support open and distance learning offered by institutions in the South (Teferra and Knight, 2008).

US-based foundations, such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York, fund other regional higher education initiatives in the South. From 2000 to 2010, several of these foundations collaborated under a consortium called the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa. The partnership focused on projects that would influence higher education across the continent, such as improving access to information and communication technologies, strengthening higher education research, the creation of regional networks for research and postgraduate training, and the creation of a university leaders' forum. Following the end of the partnership in 2010, the foundations continued their initiatives separately.

Southern African Science Service Centre for Climate Change and Adaptive Land Management (SASSCAL) is a Regional Science Service Centre in Southern Africa funded through the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany. SASSCAL is a joint initiative of Angola, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Germany, responding to the challenges of global change. The establishment of a SASSCAL created benefit for the completely southern African region. It was conceptualized and operationalized to complement the existing outstanding research and capacity development infrastructures and research initiatives in the region. It is an embedded initiative for regional and national research. Among other projects, there is the development of a collaborative postgraduate program in Earth Observation, GIS and Remote Sensing.

Through integration of application-oriented research, policy consultations and capacity development, SASSCAL will contribute substantially towards strengthening and further developing an African knowledge society and, thus, prevent brain drain by creating attractive research facilities in the region. This is to be accomplished by:

1. facilitating academic education and training of African scientists (PhD programs, Graduate Schools, fellowships, among others, in cooperation with existing programs and institutions).
2. specific capacity building (for example seminars, workshops; training of local experts and disseminators including training of non-academic partners).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The qualitative research methodology implies the real world of programs, organizations, neighborhoods, street corners and getting close to the people and circumstances to capture what is happening (Patton, 2002). This brings closeness to the subjects which is essential as action can best be understood when it is observed in the setting in which it occurs. Qualitative research explores attitudes, behaviors and experiences through methods such as desktop study and consultations. This research methodology is employed in this study because it provides results that are descriptive in nature. The research methodology was used to get opinions and experiences from participants of different universities in Africa.

Desktop studies have traditionally been used in the collection of secondary data for benchmarking and monitoring progress in different fields of study. The method was used in this study to gather existing secondary data on the challenges and benefits associated with collaborative postgraduate programs in Sub-Saharan African universities. Through desktop study, it was found that very limited literatures exist on collaborative programs.

In this study, consultative meetings were used as a tool to achieve the research objectives of producing challenges and benefits associated with collaborative postgraduate programs in Sub-Saharan African universities. The consultative meetings were held with 16 experts from different countries and various backgrounds such as academic staff members, research fund sponsors, project management, degree programs coordination,

registration and accreditations. The method helped to complement the desktop study method applied in the study and to gather existing information and knowledge relevant to the study.

Six consultative meetings were held, two in Namibia, two in South Africa and two in Zambia with representatives from South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Angola, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe in most meetings. The consultative meetings also helped the participants acquire more knowledge from the researcher on how to avoid and minimize challenges and benefits associated with collaborative postgraduate programs in Sub-Saharan African universities.

FINDINGS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Disadvantages and challenges

Many of the reported challenges point to accreditation. This challenges point to lack of an internationally recognized accreditation system and the burden of bureaucracy. In addition, local laws and governance were also cited as barriers to the accreditation process (Obst et al., 2011).

A number of challenges were unfolded from the experts and desktop study with regard to collaborative degree programs. These challenges evolve around inconsistency administration and management, poor communication, difference in legal systems, lack of funds, difficult to recruitments students and differences in official language.

Inconsistency administration and management were deemed as challenges to likely hinder sustainability, support from national or international organizations, academic calendar, institutional support, negotiating collaborative agreement between partner universities and the duration of the degree program. Main experts raised poor communication between partner universities during consultation meeting. Many cited difference in structure of reporting as the main course of poor communication.

The difference in legal systems also was cited as a challenge. This challenge was cited as critical because some universities in Sub-Saharan Africa were afraid to bid to cumbersome legal systems. Restrictions of funding utilization between countries, limited knowledge to secure adequate funding and inconsistency fee structure between universities were part of the challenges facing the Sub-Saharan African universities for collaborative degree programs.

Difficulty to recruitments students into collaborative master degrees is one of the challenges. This is because of different rules and legislations pertaining to professional boards of the respective degree programs. The language barrier also deprives prospect students to be recruited into the collaborative master's degrees. In few cases, the differences of official languages in Sub-Saharan Africa restrict and delay the willingness to collaborate between universities. This was the case with Angola under SASSCAL task 303 project. Due to language barrier, the project timeframe to identify suitable

universities between Namibia, South Africa, Angola and Botswana elapsed before a university could be identified in Angola.

A number of challenges pertaining to curriculum issues were discussed. It was found that common challenges exist in almost every country with regard to collaborative master degrees. This was a major challenge especially with course-based Masters Degrees. The challenges begins at the curriculum design stage, into accreditation of the program, then credit transfer agreement to the double counting of credits issue of respective universities.

In addition to the challenges, the experts also suggest that collaborative degree programs have disadvantages such as high expensive to maintain and can be cumbersome to maintain as partners universities has different credits and enrolment circles.

Advantages and benefits

A number of benefits were unfolded during the consultation meeting and desktop study. The experts revealed that collaborative degree programs bring out the greater collaboration between faculties and help universities in developing strategic partnership with partner institution.

The study proved that collaborative degree programs increase international visibility of the institution. Furthermore, the programs contribute to improved recruitment of more international students and bring out additional research projects (Obst et al., 2011).

A unique aspect of the collaborative degree programs is the involvement of different faculties and departments that contribute courses and faculty members who will participate in the teaching and co-supervision of students. Students and staff members are exposed to different studying and working environments respectively to get more experience.

Suggestions to alleviate the disadvantages and challenges

Dealing with collaborative degree programs requires consistent participatory techniques. Different experts consulted during the study believes that there is a need for a process that should meet multiple and mutually exclusive objectives. Among the exclusive objectives are that there is a need to increase the strategic alignment of individual university initiatives with the priorities of the involved universities (Chevallier, 2013). Maintaining shared governance between universities and reducing unnecessary administrative work in the program implementation phase are some of the objectives for suggestion. There is also a need for increasing buy-in between involved universities, and reducing program

setup time.

Some of the suggestions to avoid many challenges during collaborative degree programs are that the degree programs should be accredited in both countries and a coordination office at each university are established. The experts revealed that the collaborative universities should ensure to implement flexible teaching and learning environment, such as block release teaching. Other suggestions are that the universities should strengthen the staffs and students mobility as much as possible to allow diverse knowledge exchange and acquisition. In addition, it is important to lobby support from both national and international stakeholders and to ensure that the program have sponsors at least for the first cohort.

Conclusion

Sponsored collaborative postgraduate programs have a number of advantages. In addition to financing the program, the sponsor(s) facilitates curriculum development, joint enforcement of standards, and movements of student and staff members. It also provides support for improved teaching facilities, library services, and general management for the joint administration of the program.

Collaborative postgraduate programs are highly supported by the findings of this study as there provide opportunities to international students' communities beyond the host nations. Collaborative postgraduate programs attract international prospective students to study-abroad.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflicts of interest.

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