

X Exchange Programmes in Higher Education: The African Experience.

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Introduction

In the 1960s, immediately after the independence of African States educational exchange programmes were basically of students moving from Africa to the west, and were driven by the human capital and modernisation theories with emphasis on human resource development (Foster, 1999). Africa needed qualified personnel to take over from expatriates in all spheres of development. The 1970s and 1980s also experienced a similar type of exchanges with a few cases of west to Africa movements taking place. During the 1990s and the new millennium, policies in education have been guided by the sectorial development plans. This change is expressed in the desire to develop more symmetrical interrelations or partnerships between Africa and the West. Factors behind this shift in policies are attributed to the world conference on education for all in which it was stated that “partnerships” in education must include all actors.

The call for partnerships in education significantly featured in the Jomtien Conference on Education for all. In this context, Western universities were willing to articulate their aid efforts with the development plans and priorities of recipient universities recognising that development plans and priorities of partner universities had been formulate locally and that partner universities had the capacity to manage all activities.

This paper highlights the role of exchange programmes in higher education, obstacles to implementation of programmes, the role of information technology in exchange programmes in Africa, and the way forward.

Role of Exchange Programmes

Globally the roles of exchange programmes have been to:

- (i) Enhance academic programmes by sharing experiences;
- (ii) Provide cultural experiences for both students and staff;
- (iii) Internalisation of education;
- (iv) Generation of scientific and cultural knowledge;

- (v) Provide access to information, equipment and facilities for academic pursuance;
- (vi) Provide new perspectives in pedagogy;
- (vii) Provide opportunities for shared experience among link partners;
- (viii) Increased networks.

Although some universities' exchange mandates are narrowly concerned with the recruitment of international students, the larger ambition of others is making higher education more responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalisation of societies, economy and labour markets (King, 2000). Implicit also is the notion that the particular university has a truly global appeal and can draw on a worldwide student and teaching staff demands whether for access to its main campuses or to its overseas branches. There is also a wide aspiration to participate in the kind of world-class research that is often mentioned by the World Bank. Changes in the demographic and economic profiles of those to whom we provide education and training are rapidly bringing a globalisation of higher education. Our role as educators is also changing (Hopkins, 1996). Development in Africa, as elsewhere, requires that relevant knowledge be shared and communicated and that there be a consensus around the value of dispersing knowledge, and therefore the need for partnership in education. Linkage programmes in education provide a comparative advantage in producing knowledge, sharing knowledge and applying knowledge and making universities be at the cutting edge of knowledge (Court, 2001).

Obstacles to the Implementation of Exchange Programmes.

In the African context exchange programmes have been weak or nonexistent in some universities. The few that have been in existence are staff biased. The following have been cited as obstacles to the implementation of exchange programmes in higher education in Africa:

- ◆ The Exchange programmes have been elitists and excluded a majority of the University community, especially students;
- ◆ Exchange programmes have been inward-looking, providing little service to a wide university population and the larger community;

- ◆ Institutions of higher education require financial support for linkage activities, and yet agencies/donors are not ready to support these programmes in the African setting, thus rendering existing programmes dormant;
- ◆ Broad-based access and equal opportunities for partners remain a concern as those from the west benefit more from these exchanges since they have the resources, unlike African colleagues who lack resources;
- ◆ The general trend in the behaviour of partners from the West continues to illustrate the predominant autocratic approach that characterises partnership. Terms and conditions of link programmes are at times dictated by the West since they provide the resources for the programmes and activities;
- ◆ The World Bank's strategic policy that put emphasis on basic education at the expense of higher education in Africa affects the fundraising for exchange programmes in Africa;
- ◆ The hypocrisy of the west about the need for symmetrical relationships in education;
- ◆ Poverty conditions among universities in Africa that prevent universities from forming partnerships. Exchange programs are dependent on donor funding;
- ◆ A major problem for African universities is their inability to strengthen their negotiation of partnerships due to difficulty of access to information. This is because documents of assistance agreements, with the terms and conditions they obtain and the background documents underlying them are not generally public documents. Further, the content of agreements with donors are generally concealed from African universities. The confidential status of reports, documents and agreements generally weaken the position of African universities. Consequently, western partners have more advantage in terms of negotiation as they have access to the latest information;
- ◆ The unequal nature of the partnership makes it difficult for the African universities to challenge views and critically analyse exchange programme activities.
- ◆ In case of conflict or misunderstanding, Western partners tend to pull out from linkage activities without minding the negative effects this has on already stated activities.

Role Of Information Technology In Exchange Programmes

Information technology has simplified communication and has brought both worlds closer than ever before. Ease of communication has resulted in more communication, more information being made available, more tying up of loose ends in exchange negotiation leading to more informed choices for students and staff, and to the production and delivery of high quality educational services (Caroggies, 2000). The exchange programmes have benefited accordingly, in that many of the risks and unpleasant surprises of exchange in the past have now become history (Hopkins, 1996). For linkage programmes involving mobility among relatively few institutions, e-mail enables intentional offices on both departing and receiving ends to share modules for co-ordination of pre-departure and post-arrival orientation. Outbound and inbound students hear about the adjustments factors that are likely to be part of their experience abroad and can then prepare more thoroughly (King, 2000). For short-term studies particularly, this greater knowledge of the conditions and expectations into which one is moving means that more affective use can be made of one's limited time abroad.

In exchange programmes, technology helps participating individuals and groups manage risks and reduce them to minimal margins. It allows managers of the programmes to promote international education to students, parties and the public at large. Furthermore, through e-mail program co-ordinators can share expertise. Therefore the role of technology in exchange programmes has been one of empowerment, and enfranchisement. Individually, people are empowered to communicate more widely, frequently and cost-efficiently than was possible before new dimensions of professional capability and achievement. They also create new identities for the field. Communication through e-mail and Internet also allows students to quickly check questions of course equivalents or credit transfer.

Way Forward

- ◆ The exchange programmes should involve universities in Asia and Africa because of their application of relevant knowledge and shared experiences;
- ◆ Exchange programmes are likely to vote a variety of short-term and flexible non-degree programmes, and the development of knowledge and skills relevant to the needs and processes of the local economy and community;

- ◆ Today virtual information comes to students wherever they are. Some question whether this virtual culture will soon make exchange programmes, especially study abroad programmes and traditional universities, obsolete. For those who work with educational mobility, the question is even sharper. In future, education will certainly be more mobile. But will students need to be mobile? Already, European Union Policy calls for more virtual classrooms and virtual campuses where any student in any part of Europe will have access on demand to education and training. With education on demand available to our students, will there still be a market for the traditional study abroad programmes? Will a virtual “study abroad” program evolve with our ability to be telepresent in other cultures and language while never leaving home?
- ◆ The growing attractiveness of Joint degree programmes with an international application. There is a rising demand and recognition of such programmes on the global market;
- ◆ Faced with the new training needs and global trends, many universities in African will need to undertake drastic transformation in terms of governance, structure and mode of operation of their exchange programmes;
- ◆ The world Bank’s strategy of placing emphasis on basic education at the expense of other levels of education should be rejected and a push for a balance between other levels be put in place, as each level has a specific role to play in development. Doing so would facilitate access to funds for exchange programmes;
- ◆ Since the nature of partnerships in African universities has been unequal, there is need for a major rethinking of the current mode of operation of exchange programmes. Any meaningful partnership that universities in Africa engage in should first start among Africans drawing on their immediate economic and educational needs and priorities.

Conclusion

Exchange programmes in African universities have been either non-existent or weak. The exchange programmes have served the interests of Western universities at the expense of Africa. Thus the envisaged exchange programmes in higher education in Africa are far from being realised. With the emergence of information technology there is a further dilemma as to whether the study abroad programmes are necessary.

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