Abstract

Towards a Common African Higher Education Space

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Africa Month is a time when we commemorate the decade-long quest for African unity. African higher education should lead this process and provide the impetus for developing and unifying the continent. In this thought leader, I argue that a major contribution that higher education could make is developing a common African higher education space in which intellectual cross-fertilisation results in capacity development and knowledge generation for the continent. This idea has been mooted for some time (see, e.g. Mohamedbhai, 2013), but it is still not a reality. Core features identified in the discourse include recognition of qualifications, transferability of academic credits, a shared quality assurance framework, as well as articulation of students between universities and collaborative degrees. While those features are important and are gradually being developed, the process should be accelerated, and additional elements conceptualised. Frequently cited rationales for creating a shared African higher education space encompass quality enhancement, addressing resource constraints, and promoting African integration. All those considerations are weighty; additionally, the following aspects are also important:

First, an African higher education space should allow the continent to formulate its own research and education agenda based on its shared cultural, linguistic heritage, indigenous knowledge, and historical experience. By working together and leveraging research that integrates indigenous knowledge, African higher education stakeholders and universities could ensure that African knowledge claims its rightful space in the world. African intellectuals are producing globally competitive knowledge. As an example, despite its fragmented higher education systems, the continent was where Christiaan

Barnard performed the world's first heart transplant. Also, many globally recognised research achievements hail from the continent; for instance, Dr Muyembe-Tamfum of the DRC's Institut National de la Recherche Biomédicale in Kinshasa led a research group credited with designing the first effective treatment against the Ebola virus (https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/ebola-hunter-jean-jacques-muyembe-receives-harvard-honorary-degree/). Of course, Africa's contributions to global knowledge are not limited to the health and natural sciences. For example, the Continent has conceptualised the Philosophy of Ubuntu, which enriches global human rights, ethics, justice, and intercultural communication thinking.

Second, an African higher education space should foster African-led capacity development, which experience has shown to have many advantages compared to capacity-development initiatives coordinated by Global North stakeholders. Benefits include local ownership, the relevance of publications to the local policy and cultural context, and the strengthening of African institutions (Kasprowicz et al., 2020). Programmes such as the DELTAS-Africa initiative (https://scienceforafrica.foundation/deltas-africa), which fosters consortia that conceptualise, implement, and assess their programmes, demonstrate the potential inherent to intra-African collaboration. Successful South African capacity-development initiatives financed by the Erasmus + programme of the EU, such as the iKudu project coordinated by the UFS (https://www.ufs.ac.za/ikudu), affirm that African higher education can coordinate large-scale international consortia projects. Programmes such as the currently open EU-funded call for intra-African mobility (https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/grants/2021-2027/intra-africa-academic-mobility-scheme_en) entrusting coordination to African universities, evidence that donors from outside the continent have confidence in African higher education to manage large-scale projects. The above examples refer to externally funded capacity development; major African-funded initiatives are still scarce.

Third, an African higher education space should enhance the international standing of African higher education. Currently, African higher education lacks common quality standards. While the continent is home to many high-quality, globally competitive

institutions, it is often perceived as one in which higher education is generally of poor quality. Despite some leading African universities, including Makerere University, the University of Ibadan, the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, and the University of Cape Town, featuring high in global university rankings, there remains a perception that African higher education is generally of poor quality. Reasons for this may include that – due to the absence of shared quality standards – the continent is still home to many poorly resourced universities in the early stages of development. In a common African higher education space, shared quality standards and opportunities for increased engagement to allow cross-fertilisation in quality enhancement and assurance approaches would strengthen research and education. The enhancement of quality in particularly weaker African higher education institutions would assist in improving the global image of African higher education.

In addition to the existing initiatives to accomplish a common African higher education space, which include the Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Project (https://haqaa.aau.org/the-successful-launch-of-the-harmonization-of-the-african-higher-education-quality-assurance-and-accreditation-haqaa-initiative/), the Pan African University (https://pau-au.africa/), the establishment of a number of regional quality assurance networks (e.g. the Southern African Quality Assurance Network https://saqan.org/), and thematic networks focusing on capacity development (e.g. the RUFORUM, http://www.ruforum.org/), more could be done to work towards realising a common African higher education space:

First, at the university level, bilateral and network intra-African partnerships and collaborations based on equality, mutual trust, and rooted in the Ubuntu philosophy should be developed and strengthened. This would foster bilateral research and capacity-development initiatives and allow universities to develop continental networks that would allow them to participate in competitive grant tenders and to achieve some of the other benefits of a common African higher education space in smaller networks or bilaterally. The UFS is an example of a university following this trajectory; it has established partnerships and collaborations with African institutions that promote knowledge sharing, joint research, and academic cooperation. Today, its African partner network includes the

National University of Lesotho, the University of Botswana, the University of Cape Coast, the University of Ghana, the University of Ibadan, the University of Namibia, the University of Zimbabwe, and many other African higher education institutions. This African network of partner universities will allow the UFS to implement novel forms of intra-African collaborations and realise some of the objectives of a common African higher education space on a smaller scale with its partners.

Second, stakeholders such as national governments, the African Union, the Association of African Universities, and the African Academy of Sciences should strengthen their efforts to develop research funding and capacity development schemes at the system level. Based on the intellectual drive and availability of African co-funding, global support for initiatives that follow an African-set agenda and are based on African priorities could be developed. Institutions such as the African Academy of Sciences and RUFORUM have a commendable track record of strengthening African priorities in funding schemes benefiting African higher education. A concerted effort of the different stakeholders may allow the continent to develop its capacity development programmes in which external donor agencies may choose to invest. Thus, the agenda setting for capacity development in Africa could move to Africa.

Meanwhile, individual academics, higher education leaders, and all stakeholders in the African higher education process should focus on research and practical actions to achieve the goal of a common African higher education space. The synergy between individual initiatives would provide the impetus for the development of university- and system-level interventions. At the same time, a common African higher education space will require large-scale actions; the impetus from individual, university, and stakeholder initiatives may create synergy, ultimately achieving this goal. Rather than lamenting the absence of a shared African higher education space, stakeholders should focus on what can be achieved in their sphere of influence and thus become agents to achieve this important goal.

References:

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