

RUNNING COLLABORATIONS AND EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: BENEFITS, CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

The University of Nairobi has had collaborations and exchange programmes with many universities for quite some time now. These collaborations have been in the areas of research, students and staff exchanges. The University has collaborations with universities in the US, Europe, Asia (mainly China and Japan) as well as other African universities. We have had no exchange or collaborative linkages with universities in Latin America. Some of our collaborations are with local institutions like KNH (for training our health professionals) and KARI.

One of the major benefits of having collaborations and exchange programmes is the exposure gained by staff and students as well as the internationalization of the university and its programmes. The experience of studying in another university is one of the most invaluable benefits that a student can acquire during his/her university studies. During such exchange programmes the student does not only benefit from experiencing a different cultural environment but also from a different mode of lecture delivery and intellectual discourse than the one he/she, may be used in the home university. The other university's content in one's transcripts is no doubt a uniquely satisfying experience.

The interaction with other international students in such exchange programmes helps in widening the academic and cultural horizons of the students participating in such programmes. This is abundantly manifest to those of us who have had these different experiences in other universities during our postgraduate and doctoral studies as well as during attendance in international academic exchanges and other learned fora.

The challenges of these exchange programmes and collaborations are not to be glossed over even as one enumerates the benefits. The cultural shock and at times the language barrier are some of the most challenging problems encountered by the exchange student on his/her first study abroad. Technology is another major challenge. Video conferencing which is a normal technology in universities in the developed world is still unknown in our universities. The benefit of such an innovation are immense and would allow weekly seminars, faculty lectures and student presentations involving participants from two distant universities.

The availability of online courses is another challenge. If this were to be adopted our students would gain greater understanding of recent advances abroad. As we strive to become global universities, we need to educate our students to think in

global terms. We need to modernize our financial & legal institutions which can support our integration into the world economy. We also need to tackle the problems of uneven growth in our more remote areas as well as improve the lot of our less fortunate citizens whose children attend substandard schools and who have little or no access to adequate health care. We face common global challenges and we need to maintain an integrated global system of trade and investment under a rule of law, avoid civil war, protect the environment and avoid the spread of infectious diseases that do not respect national boundaries. We need to educate our children to be citizens of the world who will work together in addressing these global problems when they take over from us. The challenge is that we cannot do this in isolation but rather commit ourselves to maintaining and expanding the connections that bind us together. We must keep open our doors for entry by others by committing ourselves to expanding student and faculty exchanges and creating stronger and deeper institutional partnerships.

THE WAY FORWARD

In charting our way forward I want to suggest that all public universities must aim to be global institutions if they are to overcome the challenges outlined herein. As a way forward universities must increase the representation of international students in their student populations, incorporate more international content into teaching and research, continue to form collaborative relationships with institutions in other countries and reach broader audiences around the world through the use of improved communications technology. Today let me focus on two of these attributes: the movement of students across borders and the formation of collaborative relationships across institutions. I want to suggest that the first leads naturally to the second. The flow of individual students across borders is the foundation for the formation of more comprehensive partnerships.

The practice of sending students abroad will open the door to foreigners studying in Kenya and help us in modernizing our technology and economy as envisioned in Vision 2030. The flow of students out of and into our borders will also lead to greater mutual understanding. It will help us develop a deeper appreciation of the distinctive elements in Kenyan and other cultures while at the same time recognizing our common humanity and our common interest in working together. This initiative of sending our students abroad has its forerunner in the airlifts of the early 60s which, apart from providing Kenya with its first cadre, of professionals ó doctors, economists, teachers etc, also culminated in the bestowing to the world the man who would be president of the United States of America, and whom you all now know ó Barack Obama.

Today we believe that every foreign student in our public universities benefits from a growing complement of foreign students who study at our local universities. The gains flow in both directions. One learns from study abroad but also one learns from the presence of the foreign students just as our faculty benefits from the presence of post-doctoral fellows and visiting scholars in our midst.

The development of larger-scale institutional partnerships is set to become an increasingly important feature of any truly global university. At the University of Nairobi we have about 200 partnerships with universities and other institutions worldwide but regrettably only about 100 are active and an even small number can be described as robust. Among the active collaborations hardly any are with an African University and this needs the change.

Some of the faculties at the University of Nairobi are engaged with foreign colleagues in collaborative research projects ranging from the search for an AIDS cure to space studies and geological surveys.

Some of these institutional collaborations arise, not from top-down directives of university administrators, but rather from long standing personal relationships among scholars and scientists. I am sure most of us here know of on-going or past research collaboration between Kenyans and foreigners emanating from such personal relationships as can be formed only during study abroad or such other experiences.

In conclusion, I want to say that personal relationships formed as a consequence of student and faculty exchanges are now becoming institutionalized. They are taking on a depth and permanence beyond that of a personal relationship between two scholars. They will undoubtedly propel Kenyan science and research to world leadership.

As we at the University of Nairobi and, I believe, in other public universities pursue world class excellence, the value of scientific and cultural exchanges cannot be gainsaid. Together with our partners we can educate global citizens for the future and extend the frontiers of knowledge for the benefit of all humanity.

Thank you for listening to me