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Strengthening University Partnerships and Collaborations in Kenya: Strategies for Sustainability

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Abstract

Globally, university partnerships and collaborations have been identified as key pillars of the tripartite roles of universities namely; Academics, Research, and Civic Engagement. In Africa, there is intensified effort to strengthen university partnerships with the governments, industry and communities for greater impact to socio-economic development. The role of university partnerships is considered a vital driver of not only research and innovation but also capacity development as well as internationalization. In this paper, multiple case analysis approach was used to explore the strategies being employed by universities in Kenya with a view of teasing out lessons for advancing partnerships and collaborations in universities in Africa. The two main objectives of the study were; to find out the strategies employed by universities in advancing partnerships and (ii) to establish challenges affecting university partnerships in Kenya. Random sampling was used to identify public and private universities for the study in order to establish the objective position across the higher education landscape. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected. The respondents of the study were purposively selected due to the unique nature of the study. Among various initiatives, the paper highlights some distinctive projects, initiated courtesy of university partnerships in the 21st century. The paper highlights developing partnership policies, creating monitoring systems and capacity building as key ingredients for enhancing resilient and sustainable partnerships and collaborations.

Key Words: *University partnerships, policy framework, typologies of partnerships, internationalization*

1. Introduction

i) Universities and Internationalization

Internationalization has become one of the strategic pillars of transforming higher education in Africa. It offers distinctive opportunities to universities in sub-Saharan Africa to learn from their counterparts in the north. One of the seven aspirations of Agenda 2063 is to build Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner. One of the unique opportunities that internationalization offers to Africa's higher education is the strengthening research and innovation functions as well as the academic capacities of institutions. Recently, African universities have been accused of contributing only about 1.1% to the global scientific knowledge with just about 79 scientists in one million Africans compared to 4,500 scientists per one million people contributed by their counterparts in USA (Bokova, 2010).

With this type of trend, partnerships assume an important position in reinvigorating research in Africa. It therefore becomes necessary that Africa's internationalization policies and strategies should, therefore, aim at strengthening collaborations so as to improve the research agenda in the universities. For such policies to be formulated, there is need for strong structures and infrastructure to be developed to support and sustain knowledge production (Jowi, 2010). Besides low investment in research, another challenge that affects Africa's development is the low ratio of researchers per million inhabitants in the world. However, with the advent of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) and its extensive penetration in the continent, universities can tap into this to transformation the situation. ICT has the capacity to share volumes of information that can be accessed through diverse ways. For instance, the massive shift to online resources, such as the African e-Journal Project, is providing new opportunities to disseminate African research in an economically sustainable way and with wider reach. University partnerships that

promote internationalization would provide institutions and their host countries prospects that cut across disciplines, knowledge-systems, and nation-state boundaries thereby exposing the institutions and academics to the world's best scientific research and infrastructures (Oanda, 2013). Since higher education systems around the world have presented a propensity for internationalization, Kenyan universities have to mainstream internationalization in all the core functions for enhanced benefits and greater impact (Kathae, 2015).

ii) University Industry Partnership

University-industry relationships are symbiotic because for industry to innovate and remain competitive in a rapidly evolving world, they require universities to supply knowledge and innovation. On the other hand, universities on their part require industry to offer opportunities for the transfer of technologies, opportunities for students' placement and occasionally financial support in an era of reduced capitation from governments. However, as pointed out by Perkmann and Salter (2012), one challenge facing university-industry partnerships is that while universities mostly focus on research with long-term challenges, industry mostly focuses on time-bound and short-term projects which require urgent attention. Industry sometimes feel that universities pursue slow and bureaucratic process that are costly to their objectives. As a result of this challenge, most organizations prefer dealing with universities in an ad hoc, piecemeal manner, led by individual initiative rather than any corporate strategy and long-term policy focused approaches. Universities need to develop policies that support both short term industry friendly partnerships. Short-term collaborations should be facilitated to benefit organizations whose objectives do not require longevity. However, policies are fundamental to successful creative structuring of such project partnerships in order not to disadvantage the academia at the expense of pragmatism.

Lately there is a lot of talk about skills and their importance for a country's development. In Kenya there is a lot of shift towards TVET institutions with the aim of strengthening these institutions to provide skills for the contemporary society. Knowledge and skills are understood to be "the driving forces of economic growth and social development in any country. Industries have a big role to play in partnering with higher education to enhance skills among the Kenyan population.

iii) Problem Statement

Lately, Africa's higher education has been lagging behind other regions in the world. NEPAD (2017) notes that given the size of the African continent, in terms of land mass and population (1.2 billion), it is surprising that none of its many institutions of higher education feature among the ranked universities in the world. Only about 10 of the world's top 1,000 universities are in Africa, eight of which are in South Africa. This means that universities from other countries including East Africa do not feature among the top institutions in the world. For universities from Kenya to compete on the global stage, as well as for it to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, there is an urgent need to revisit the strategies for improving the quality of higher education, one of them being partnerships and collaborations. The paper set out to unearth the salient patterns characterizing partnerships in Kenya's higher education.

iv) Research Objectives

- i. To find out the strategies employed by universities in advancing partnerships
- ii. To establish the barriers and challenges affecting university partnerships in Kenya.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design with a multiple case analysis approach in order to collect in-depth information from the sample in the target universities. The design was considered appropriate for the study because according to Robson (2002) survey is concerned with describing, recording, analyzing and reporting conditions that exist. The survey design enabled the researchers to compile information on typologies and issues relevant to policy directions to be embraced by higher education institutions in Kenya in order to enhance sustainable partnerships and collaborations. Both public and private universities were sampled for the study in order to establish the existing position across the higher learning institutions. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The respondents of the study were purposively selected due to the unique nature of the study. Teaching staff (faculty) and university administrators specifically heads of departments were interviewed.

3. Findings

i) Partnership policies

Over 55% of the respondents indicated that there was moderate to substantial existence of partnerships in their institutions. This indicates that majority of members of staff do not actively participate in partnerships or universities

despite the noble plans by university leadership to enhance partnerships. The trend is disturbing considering not only the potential of partnerships to faculty but also to the departments and the institutions as a whole.

Over 67% of those interviewed observed that they were not aware of any partnership policies in their institutions. However, 82% indicated that there was commitment by management to support partnership building. This trend points to the fact that perhaps universities are keen on ensuring that partnerships are initiated as has been the trend without realizing the importance of developing specific policies to govern partnerships in their institutions.

In the eight universities that participated in the study, only 3 (37.5%) had policies on partnerships. Over 60% of the universities do not have policy documents to guide the processes of partnership formation and sustainability. In the institutions where there were no specific policy documents on partnerships, the university managers interviewed in the study observed that policies on partnerships were part of other university policy documents like the ones for research and consultancy. For those that had policy documents, the institutions were open about their operations to the extent of placing the policies online on their university websites. The policy documents were developed as tools of governance in the area of partnerships. The policies spelt out their role in guiding best practices especially in research partnerships.

The reason why we need policies to focus on university partnerships is because of the growing practice and appreciation of development research and innovation, which often involves university-based researchers, but not everyone starts with all the necessary skills and experience to develop effective partnerships across different types of institutions. The partnerships policies should embody partnership principles that underpin values such as trust; transparency; accountability; reciprocity; and respect. The enactment of these principles evolves over time through mutual learning, voluntary participation and commitment. Policies provide for coherence, consistency and predictability in the universities' approach to partnerships. A look at our national priorities envisioned in Kenya Vision 2030 and other national priorities such as Kenya's the Big Four Agenda signify the need for partnerships, programs, and policies to be redrawn and overhauled for better results. It becomes essential to establish parameters and guidelines on how partnership members will work together. To achieve this, partnership policies are an effective way to maintain healthy working relationships. Partnership policies serve as guidelines on how partnerships members will behave and interact with one another. Creating partnership policies requires institutions to take the time to consider past experience, benchmark with other institutions internationally and commit leadership to transforming the institution through viable partnerships.

Besides policies, the strategic plans of the universities in the study were analyzed to understand the place of partnerships and strategies planned for by the universities in pursuing the research agenda. In all the universities, their Strategic plans articulate the goal of creating partnerships and collaborations. In some universities, the strategic plans dedicate complete chapters to the subject of partnerships while in some, the units that manage partnerships have specific plans on the agenda of partnerships and collaborations. The log frames of some strategic plans did not clearly spell out specific tangible performance indicators that would have an impact on the long-term development of the institutions. In one case, the performance indicator of mounting collaborative research programme was simply "partners identified" an indicator that was found to be too narrow in scope. In other universities however, the strategic plans indicate a willingness to sensitize and support faculty on partnerships. When the faculty were interviewed on this strategy, 73% of the faculty across the institutions observed that their universities hardly built their capacity on partnerships.

ii) Typologies of Partnerships

In the study, four main typologies of partnerships were found to exist in most universities in Kenya. First, are the higher education support services. These are partnerships involving international, regional and national research networks. Examples of this types of partnerships are the regional higher education arrangements such as the ones under the Inter University Council for East Africa. Through such partnerships, some universities engage in benchmarking activities aimed at strengthening their missions.

The second typology is the University-Industry partnerships. Some of the activities undertaken under these types of partnerships include curriculum development, student placement, staff engagement and consultancies, innovation and community-based initiatives. Under the contemporary and highly competitive environment, universities are partnering with communities and industry to customize work-integrated learning curriculum that has the potential to achieve productive outcomes by allowing learners to contextualize study content within the socio-cultural and functional environment of the industry or community.

Third, are financing initiatives including scholarships, students financing and philanthropy. Some universities have benefited from philanthropists who have given to their institutions especially in infrastructural development. Some of the infrastructure developed through these partnerships include the Kenyatta University's Chandaria Innovation and Incubation Centre which was established with support from the Chandaria Foundation. Fourth are service delivery partnerships including contracting of non-core services. In an effort to focus on their core mandates, some universities contract non-core services to other organizations. Some of the services include security, cleaning and transport. However, in terms of multi-disciplinary nature of the partnerships, the faculty interviewed felt that members were still working in silos rather than embracing synergy and multi-disciplinary approaches to partnerships. Multidisciplinary partnerships involve concerted efforts employed in bringing together several disciplines in order to provide complementary contributions in a common objective.

Hagedoorn, Link, and Vonortas (2000) observe that, university-industry partnerships have different objectives, scopes, and institutional arrangements. The collaboration may be more or less intense and may focus on training or research activities. Collaboration may be formal or informal from formal equity partnerships, contracts, research projects, patent licensing to human capital mobility publications and interactions in conferences and expert groups.

In a Survey across five different universities in South Africa, Jarvey et al (2012) found out that 81% of academics collaborated with an external partner, 58% of those collaborating, were with industry and 55% of the industry collaborations were in technology fields. Most of the collaborations noted in Kenyan universities in the study were from STEM related disciplines and business and entrepreneurship. There is need for universities to diversify typologies of partnerships to benefit many other disciplines in the universities including education, arts and humanities.

iii) Barriers to Successful Partnerships

The heterogeneous cultures that exists among institutions was gleaned to be one of the barriers to vibrant institutional partnerships. As was expected, institutions have their own unique cultures, which relate to the way they do things. Some respondents in the study observed that institutional cultures are pervasive and often affect the success of partnerships. According to the respondents, the bureaucratic culture found in public universities for example curtailed noble gains that should be realized in partnerships. Another barrier cited among some institutions were related to systems. Another major barrier that was cited in the study is the lack of efficient ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems of the partnerships. This is no doubt a barrier to pragmatic institutional partnerships. Monitoring systems were cited by university administrators and faculty as key to ensuring that the partnership objectives are monitored along the way. Thirdly was the absence of systems for incentivizing partnership efforts in the universities. Teaching staff and researchers felt that at times, they would work hard in developing partnerships but would sometimes be left out when the institutions begin to reap from the collaborations. Fourth, there were cases where faculty members in the universities felt that partners' differential knowledge and experiences affected the life cycles of their partnerships. Fifth, a lack of understanding of industry needs and mechanisms of effective interaction with industry was also cited as a barrier to successful partnerships.

4. Conclusions

It was evident from the study that universities in Kenya take partnerships as a key ingredient of development especially in the core functions of teaching, research and outreach. Among the strategies, universities are using in terms of typologies, there are four main types of partnerships that exist within public and private institutions in Kenya. The four typologies are higher education support services, university-industry partnerships, financing initiatives and service delivery partnerships. Some partnerships especially those relating to higher education support constitute the internationalization agenda of the universities. It was also noted that the policy and governance framework for partnerships in universities was not very strong necessitating the need to strengthen these frameworks in order to realize optimal benefits. The inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary culture evident in leading universities in the world was also not found to be strong. It is also noted that most universities lack systems for monitoring partnerships and collaborations in their institutions.

5. Recommendations

- i. University leaders need to make university partnerships a strategic priority and build the capacity of the entire academic and research community for maximum gain.
- ii. University leaders need to develop incentives for university staff and provide seed resources to manage a cultural shift that does not undercut basic research but puts a clear priority on engaging with industry for mutual benefit and for the benefit of society.

- iii. Partnerships need to be institutionalized for long-term success. Partnerships will thrive where vibrant institutional cultures are supported to sustain efforts at individual, departmental and institutional levels. Universities to be open to giving people leadership positions who bring more than just an academic pedigree. Partnerships require persons with a multidisciplinary mindset and people who are mentors and bridge-builders.
- iv. Universities to promote a multidisciplinary approach to research, learning and innovation. The multidisciplinary research should include where necessary engagement with industry and communities in order to promote research uptake and enrichment of the university curricula.
- v. University leadership to create partnership policies and norms which have an important role in guiding the different typologies of partnerships. Clearly articulated policies will ensure efficiency and accountability on shared values in the partnerships.
- vi. Institutions of higher learning should create systems and mechanisms for monitoring partnerships.

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