BRIDGING THE REGIONAL AND INFORMATION GAPS TO ACHIEVE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCTION

S.O. Adedeji

University of Nottingham, U.K.

J.B. Babalola

University of Ibadan, Ibadan,

S.B. Odekunle

NISER, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Abstract

This article discusses the issue of regional cooperation and development with specific reference to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The paper points out that although higher education may still be nationally based, it can no longer be considered as nationally bound. Consequently, systems for quality assurance, which are nationally limited in reach and scope, do no longer satisfy. In fact, the domestic process for quality assurance, which was historically not intended to serve a regional or international purpose, has become grossly inadequate. Inter-universities cooperation, and not isolation, therefore, is indispensable parapher nalia for the region to achieve social, economic, political and technological breakthrough. However, the paper identifies some inhibiting factors, such as low absorptive capacity of the economy, ideological bi-polarity, regional dichotomy, kaleidoscopic nature of political environment and undeveloped economy, which limit ECOWAS in achieving the status of European Community Union (ECU) sequel to their cooperative venture in Higher Education. Nonetheless, the article foresees a ray of hope for the ECOWAS, based on the global examples of exchange programmes and centralisation of research activities through the apparatus of Information Communication Technologies (ICT). The paper concludes by making suggestions that could harness and enhance the abundant resources of higher education in the region for the optimum benefits of its people.

Introduction

Developing countries are rapidly adopting information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the hope of achieving accelerated economic growth and development. This hope is further reinforced in a relatively well-balanced Human Development Report produced by the UNDP (2001). ICTs are changing economic and social patterns in industrialised countries, and are facilitating the globalisation of the production and market systems. However, a careful observation of the state of things in African countries, especially in the tertiary institutions, revealed that they still lag far behind their counterparts in the developed world as far as accessing and utilising the potential of information communication technologies are concerned, in boosting

the quality of processes and products of higher education. As at today, there is mounting concern about the quality of schooling, particularly at the tertiary level, in most of the developing countries. This concern is rooted in the belief that literacy levels and academic

achievements will determine an individual's job attainment and earning as well as the general economic well-being of the society. Moreover, that the quality of life in the society will be affected by the level and quality of social skills acquired in schools. The poor quality of education in the developing world today is manifested through emphasis on rote learning, outdated curricula, shortage of textbooks, chemical and relevant teaching and learning facilities. Poor quality of education also shows up in output indicators. These include inability of products from our schools (primary and secondary) to read and write efficiently, non-suitability of products of tertiary institutions for available vacancies and their irrelevance to national and regional developmental needs. Other indicators, according to Adedeji and Bamidele (2003), are the need for postgraduate education to attain relevance in the labour market, criminal neglect and pervasive decay in values and standards and poor results of our students in international tests. Whereas information and communication technology (ICT) is creating new networks that cross cultures as well as great distances, access to and use of these technologies are, however, incredibly uneven. This disparity - "digital divide" – so called, is, to a very large extent, a reflection of deeper social and economic inequalities both between and within countries. Recent estimates indicate that less than 15% of the total number of users of the Internet and ICT live in developing countries (Van der Wende 2000). The situation is even worse if this were to be considered at the higher education level. The question now is how can this digital disparity be resolved? How can the quality of higher education be improved in the African region? What lessons can we learn from European Community Union on the process of regional co-operation? What role can regional cooperation and Information Communication Technology play in improving the quality of higher education?

Thus, the article is divided into six sections. Section 2 considers aims of regional cooperation, while section 3 looks at the process of regional cooperation. The link between ICT and quality of higher education is the issue addressed in section 4 and section 5 focuses on the problems associated with linking regional cooperation and ICT with quality of higher education. The article is concluded in section 6.

Aims of regional cooperation:

The need for integrating and networking higher education in African region in general and West African sub-region in particular cannot be overstated, especially in the face of mounting global challenges and competitiveness. Nkrumah (1958) said:

> *If Africa is to enjoy the full benefits of its rich resources, it must unite to plan for*
> *the total defence and full exploitation of the material and human resources in the*
> *full interest of Africans.*

Inter-university integration can be seen as strategies aimed at expanding higher education provision and ideas across national boundaries. These strategies are similar to Anne Welle-Strand's (2002) concept of internationalisation. Drawing from the work of Knight (1999), Welle-Strand described globalisation and internationalisation as dynamically related concepts, and that internationalisation of higher education can be seen as a proactive response to catalyse globalisation. Inter-university cooperation as such can be seen as a strategy taking account of both regional and national challenges. Van der Wende (2000) opined that 'whereas political,

cultural and academic rationales have been driving internationalisation over the last decades, now, increasingly, economic rationales play a role'.

Regional cooperation in higher education often refers to exchange programmes and student mobility. However, Van der Wende (1997) described internationalisation or inter-universities cooperation, which only emphasises individual mobility as a narrow conceptualisation of internationalisation. Moreover, an emerging and potentially strong internationalisation strategy is the so-called 'borderless education' or trans-national distance education on the Internet. The term 'borderless higher education' refers to a range of interrelated activities – including e-learning and other forms of trans-national provision that cross a variety of 'borders', whether geographical, sectoral or conceptual (Ryan 2002).

Ekane (1993) in a paper presented during the International Conference on West African Integration, Dakar, IDRC/ECOWAS, highlighted three main variables, which are germane to a useful discussion on inter-university co-operation. First, he identified the subject matter for cooperation - staff development, curriculum development, awareness on culture, networking and graduate production. Second, he examined the nature of participating states (universities) – inability on the side of some countries to finance and provide university education to meet their need for manpower requirements, culture of isolation among West African Scholars, and University teachers, and heterogeneous nature of member states, especially with regards to social needs, priorities and linguistics. Third and most important, Ekane proposed various central institutions under the umbrella of African Regional Commission for Higher Education (ARCHE) to manage various aspects of the inter-university co-operation.

For the purposes of proper planning, control and coordination of cooperative activities, among institutions, which are scattered in space, there is the need for a central body as suggested by Ekane.

Moreover, given the demands and needs for formulating, implementing as well as monitoring African regional universities' ICT programme as strategy for improving the quality of their services, additional resources will be required. They also need to adopt measures to ensure equitable access and widespread capacity to make use of ICT. Although, developing countries presently lack the legal frameworks and institutional capacities to foster widespread adoption and absorption of ICT or to attract the relevant national and international investment for infrastructure, services and capacity development.

Previous studies have shown that meaningful national or regional economic or political development is a function of human resource development of that nation or region (Babalola and Odekunle, 1991, Odekunle 1997, and Adedeji & Bamidele 2003). In other words, economic and political development cannot take place except when there is first development of education. Anderson and George (1980) while examining the relationship between provision of education and economic development in the United States of America (USA) and around the world concluded that the expansion of educational provision may have resulted from the generation of wealth through economic development and vice versa.

However, Lewis (1962) pointed out that in the circumstances of a poor country, the amount of education, which will pay for itself in economic terms, is bound to be limited because of the limited absorptive capacity of the economy. This is the situation of things in the developing countries whereby the progress of regional cooperation and development is limited because of limited access to higher education and information technologies.

The history of economic development all over the world has shown that where opportunity to go to school is limited, the bulk of the population has to work most of the time because the technology for high productivity is hampered due to the level of their literacy and skill

acquisition. However, the converse of this is that where opportunities exist for education for a substantial proportion of the population, people develop their intelligence and skills. This scenario demonstrates the importance of education as an engine and potent instrument for economic, political, cultural and social development within the region.

The next section of this paper will take a cursory look at the process of regional cooperation.

Process of Regional Integration of Higher Education

Although higher education may still be nationally based, it can no longer be considered as nationally bound. Consequently, systems for quality assurance, which are nationally limited in reach and scope, do no longer satisfy. In general the domestic process for quality assurance was historically not intended to serve a regional or international purpose. Therefore, the goal of inter-universities co-operation is to make the nationally based system of higher education more international by integrating regional and international elements into teaching, research and service functions. Also, to introduce new elements into higher education, such as co-operation, exchange and regionally and internationally based curriculum. The experience of the European Union, where the aim of improving the quality of education among member states is reflected in their community action in higher education, provides important lessons for any meaningful discussion on the process of integrating higher education.

Lesson from European Community

Educational unity has always supplemented regional cooperation in Europe, particularly during the intellectual eras of the Renaissance, Humanism and the Enlightenment (Raivola, 1991). During this period, universities in Europe were genuinely international. This nationality of the students was irrelevant and there was a free mobility of educated labour across Europe. Though politically fragmented, Europe for centuries steadily strengthened and promoted regional cooperation though uniform education. Two strategies were adopted to circumvent the forces limiting the survival of integrated higher education in Europe. First, is to homogenise educational system, which connotes unification of educational structures and processes as far as possible and thus ensure equivalent educational outcomes; second is to intensify students' trainings and personal exchanges and to build an efficient information network on educational system. This programme aimed at creating a system in which ten per cent (10%) of students will go to a university in another member country to study for at least a semester. This programme can be emulated in the African region.

Scandinavian Cooperation through Curriculum Reorientation

According to Kabir (1966), Norwegians, Swede's, Finns or Danes have often fought in the past but re-orientation by the teaching of history in their Scandinavian countries has created a regional cooperation. At the start of the re-orientation, joint commissions were set up to supervise the selection of textbooks in elementary schools to eliminate factors which may implant in the minds of small children hatred against one another, Scandinavian people. Definitely, the job of re-orientation of the school curriculum is not that of the primary and secondary education system alone, but higher education also can initiate the process and ensures that necessary inputs for effective re-orientation of school courses are put in place.

The integration of higher education in African region should emphasise cross-cultural and cross-regional supply of the much needed educated manpower and free flow of information using ICT to manage and accelerate the quality of education and development of the region.

In addition, other benefits that can be enjoyed through integration of higher education are listed as follows:

Exchange Programmes

Exchange of Technical Academic Personnel (TAP) and Interaction and Material Programmes (IMP) is capable of promoting greater cooperation among the people of the member states. It is also capable of removing narrow-mindedness and egoism, which may thereby foster social and cultural cooperation. Moreover, there is the possibility of enhancing efficient allocation of educated manpower through exchange of personnel. Also, excess labour can be mobilised from high to low density regions.

Joint Research and Statistical Development

Significant benefits may be derived through joint research and statistical activities. This cooperation might well be the initial step on the road to further cooperative arrangements, through the development of a common approach, which could be applied to the policy-making level. It may also lead to exchange of data. Results of independent research are likely to be made available for member states for application or further investigation. Generally, uniformity of methodological and consistency of research results, presumably, may enhance mutual trust in data and information generated within the community. The European Council for Nuclear Research (CERN), Geneva, founded in 1954, is a typical example of cooperation in research activities. In addition, The European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), founded in 1958 and European Space Research Organisation (ESRO) founded in 1962, to coordinate nuclear research and promote international cooperation in space research are also good examples of regional cooperation through education.

Comparative Advantage

Another advantage of regional cooperation in education is the possibility of compensating a member state for its losses in one sector by benefits in another. For instance, the possibility of mobilising excess labour from a high-density region to a low-density region. The programme of Technical Aid Corps (TAC) practiced in Nigeria to assist other African countries in their critical areas of need of educated manpower provides an excellent example. Sabbatical programmes, books, journals etc. are services made available to meet the needs of students and researchers of member states. The next section will consider the link between ICT and quality of higher education.

The link between ICT and quality of higher education

The relationship between universities integration through ICT and quality are usually based on the assumption or expectation that regional co-operation and exchange of information, individual students, teachers or researchers will add to the critical mass, allow for mutual learning, for synthesis of best approach and practices, for cross-cultural understanding, for foreign language acquisition, etc. it is at the individual, the institutional and even the system level that this co-operation and exchange is expected to contribute to quality of processes and outcomes.

ICT can make a great difference on the delivery pattern and spread of education. Distance learning and the Open University programmes need to explore the use of ICT for efficient dissemination of information and knowledge to their students across culture and borders. Moreover, ICT could play a significant role in providing accurate and timely information to understand the inter-linkages across several regional developmental activities. Information communication technologies should also be an increasingly important part of the efforts of

African universities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their administrative processes and become more responsive to its citizenry. The direct and indirect benefits of ICT to African people will be the measure of its successful inter-universities integration. This reinforces the idea that ICT and inter- regional co-operation should not be seen as an end in itself but as a means for quality enhancement. Having briefly discussed some of the key roles of ICT in promoting inter-universities co-operation, the next section will highlight the problems associated with ICT in the regional inter-university co-operation.

The Problems of Sub-Regional Cooperation in Education:

There are many problems confronting regional cooperation through education and exchange of information. Some of these are discussed as follows:

Low Absorptive Capacity of the Economy

Lewis (1962), as quoted, believed that in the circumstances of a poor country, the amount of education, which will pay for itself in economic terms, is bound to be limited because of limited absorptive capacity of the economy. Equally important to this has been Africa's lack of institution and manpower capacity with which to generate and then maximise new information and communication technologies for quality improvement in higher education and regional development as a whole.

Ideological Bi-polarity

Higher education must be truly competitive with international standards before it can have an effective impact on regional cooperation. Faggerland and Saha (1983) have put together a helpful typology of societies, such as United States of America, United Kingdom and Federal Republic of Germany, which were classified as developed capitalists, evolved education philosophies which include high participation in education; education for individual achievement and open recruitment and selection, inter alia. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for instance, consists of 9 French-speaking countries, 5 English-speaking countries, and 2 Portuguese-speaking countries with different economic, political, cultural and ideological interests and affiliation. Although, there is likelihood that there is similarity in the educational polices of all these three separate ideological blocs, but there is no doubt that they have different orientation. Hence, it will be virtually impossible, with this type of ICT structure, to homogenise the educational system within the sub-region.

Regional Dichotomy

The Anglophone-Francophone arrangement in Africa may result into the split, which may have serious implications for the cooperation. For instance, it is envisaged that Francophone countries may not give total cooperation and adequate commitment to the programme – Exchange of Technical Academic Personnel and Material because of their colonial masters which were based on the pressure of interfere with African inter-state organisations or programmes (Sega, 1967). There is a good deal of evidence that France used the Yaounde Agreement to encourage their African States associated with the European Economic Community (EEC) to place their development hopes on receiving aid and services from France (Hazlewood, 1967). It is observed that since French-speaking African countries were accustomed to such aid, it might take them little efforts to convince themselves that the ICT programme or educational cooperation bears little relations to their interests or need.

Political Kaleidoscopic

Perhaps, the most crucial obstacle to development during the past decades in Africa is the over-changing nature of political leadership. It would be most charitable, according to Obilade (1989), to state that the only consistent feature about the economic, social and political development within the African region is its inconsistency in terms of policy formulation and implementation. Political instability is the commonest feature in the African region and this has greatly affected development of higher education. A typical example was the closure of universities in Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia etc. for upward of 6 months, within one academic year. An education system that can afford to close down indefinitely because of poor government policy culminating into unions' strike will find it difficult to contribute meaningfully to human capital development and economic growth of African region on a sustainable basis.

In short, the constant changes in the government of the region have engendered an erratic educational system, which has affected programmes of regional cooperation and coordination.

Undeveloped Economy

There is prevalence of poverty in most of the countries forming the ECOWAS. It will be recalled that ECOWAS was established at a time of global economic difficulties occasioned by political crisis and natural calamities. Although the curriculum of higher education may be very relevant and the research outputs may gear toward promoting cooperation and development in all fields, if the economy does not create job opportunities for graduates and utilise the research outputs, then higher education may fail to attract any benefit. Coupled with this is the issue of affordability. In general, the cost of telecommunications is still too high. Although in many instances market processes have helped to reduce cost and extend access, market failures remain pervasive, especially in many of the Least Developed Countries.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this article, we have discussed the concept of regional cooperation and have examined the relationship between ICT and quality of higher education. The paper pointed out exchange of information and high-level manpower is *sin-qua-non* for the region to achieve social, economic, political and technological breakthroughs. Regardless of these tremendous benefits, the paper also identified some problems, such as ideological bi-polarity, regional dichotomy, political kaleidoscopic and undeveloped economy, which may conspire together to undermine the attempt to use higher education as an instrument for regional cooperation.

To circumvent these inhibiting factors therefore, the following recommendations are made:

❖ Assist member countries to create national centers, for curriculum development where they do not exist.

178

- ❖ Articulate a common language as a lingua franca and establish accreditation board to validate programmes.
- ❖ Provide information on programmes and set up educational network.
- ❖ Provide scholarships and training programmes, study tours, information and personnel exchange programmes and inter-university competitions in the sub-region.
- ❖ Successful cooperation in the field of education must be based on a clear identification, specification and relevance of the educational system, which would benefit the member states.
- ❖ It is suggested that in order to achieve regional cooperation, it would be necessary to explore methods of achieving harmonisation of development plans as well as equitable distribution of educational facilities among participating countries.
- ❖ Equally important is the harmonisation of the educational policies through a rational approach to the policy of regional educational cooperation to reflect the interdependencies inherent in the process.
- ❖ There is need to re-orientate the educational system so that the pattern of enrolment in higher educational institutions will conform to the regional estimated manpower demand.

References

Adedeji, S.O & R. O. Bamidele (2003): Economic Impact of Tertiary Education on Human Capital Development in Nigeria. *Human Resource Development in Africa.* The Nigerian Economic Society (NES). Selected Papers for the 2002 Annual Conference

Anderson & George, P. (1980): *A Link between education and development* .Washington D.C: The World Bank.

Anne Welle-Strand (2002). *Seventh quality in higher education international seminar, transforming quality*, Melbourne, Australia 30th-31st October 2002.

Awa, E.O. (1983). *National integration in Nigeria: Problem and prospects.* A Paper presented at the National Workshop on National Integration by NISER, Ibadan.

Babalola, J.B. (1991). *A Comparative analysis of education development in selected African countries.* A Paper presented at the World Conference on Comparative Adult Education, University of Ibadan 7-11, Oct.

Babalola, J.B. & Odekunle, S.O. (1993). *The impact of higher education on regional cooperation,* IDRC/ECOWAS International Conference on Regional Cooperation held in Dakar, Senegal, 11-15 January, 1992.

Ekane, W.N. (1993). *Regional cooperation and higher education.* A paper presented at the International Conference on West African Integration, Dakar, IDRC/ECOWAS.

Faggerland, I. & Saha, L.J. (1983): *Educational and national development. A comparative perspective*, Oxford: Pergamon.

Hazlewood, A. (ed.) (1967): *African integration and disintegration.* London:Oxford University Press.

Kabir, H. (1966).*Education and national integration in India,*In Hanson, J.W. &. Brembeck C.S. (Eds) *Education and development of nations.* New York: Rinehard and Wiston.

Knight, J. (1999). "Internationalisation of higher education*" In IMHE (Ed), Quality and internationalisation in higher education.* Paris: OECD

Lewis, A. (1962). Education and economic development, *International social science journal (XIV) (2).*

Obilade, S. (1989). *An introduction to educational administration.* Ibadan: Odusote Bookstores Ltd.

Odekunle, S.O. (1997). Higher education and sub-regional cooperation: prospects and problems. *Nigerian journal of development issues: education, socio-political and economic development, . 1,(1).*

Ryan, Y. (2002*). Emerging indicators of success and failure in borderless higher education.* Report, The Observatory on borderless higher education, London: UK

T. in Kalvermark & Wende, M. van der (1997). *National policies for the Internationalisation of higher education in Europe.* Stockholm: Högskoleverket

Dr.S.O.Adedeji is a lecturer in the Department of Educational Management, University of Ibadan. His research interest is in the area of Educational Policy Planning and Management. He is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Comparative Education Research, University of Notthingham, U.K.,under the MacArthur Foundation Grant. Please address future correspondence to: Department of Educational Management, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. (E-mail: soadedeji_dr@yahoo.co.uk)

Professor J.B.Babalola lectures in the Department of Educational Management University of Ibadan. He specialises in Educational Planning, Management and Economics of Education. Please direct correspondence to Department of Educational Management, University of Ibadan, ,Ibadan, Nigeria. (E-mail:joelbabalola2000@yahoo.co.uk). Tel: +234 – 80 – 33977313

Mr.S.O.Odekunle is a Research Fellow at Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), Ibadan,Nigeria. He is interested in Planning Education for Economic Cooperation and Development. Please address correspondence to: Nigerian Institute of S ocial and Economic Reseach,Ibadan,Nigeria.