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Focus no. 2

The Regionalisation of University Systems: An Empty Shell?

Olivier Provini

Translated by I.J. Walker

In 2006, the Inter-university Council of East Africa (IUCEA) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) established a partnership to promote quality assurance programs within public and private universities in East Africa. Between 2006 and 2012 the DAAD invested 1.4 million EUR for this large scale project for the sector. This cooperation programme has, among other things, enabled staff from various universities to undertake management training in Germany and to draft framework documents that set benchmarks and regional standards for public and private institutions' quality assurance procedures. This collaboration between the IUCEA and DAAD is part of a policy of harmonisation of certain activities in higher education institutions within the framework of the East African Community (EAC) and based on the European integration model (the European Union and the Bologna Process).

This inter-university council is an organisational structure of the EAC, the inception of which dates back to 1970, following the dismantling of the University of East Africa. Indeed, the formation of the IUCEA has been supported by the legacies of the universities of Nairobi (Kenya), Makerere (Uganda), and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), all of which share a singular history and common anglophone academic practices as they formed, between 1963 and 1970, the University of East Africa, an independent college of the University of London. Because of this, the IUCEA's official mission has been to coordinate and pilot regional university policies with higher education national commissions from each member country, the sector being thought of as a driving force for regional integration. IUCEA's principal objectives are therefore to facilitate contact between leaders of East African universities, to provide an arena for discussion for higher education stakeholders, and to establish comparable academic standards. The IUCEA is therefore a space that encourages a priori the sharing of technical expertise, while disseminating a specific vision of what it is, what it must be and what it means to be a university. Since the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, IUCEA's successive executive secretaries, notably Tanzania's Mayunga H.H. Nkunya and Rwanda's

Alexandre Lyanmabje, have indicated their willingness to strengthen the standardisation of the regional space, in particular on the basis of this quality assurance policy.

One of the central changes adopted by higher education institutions in the region, that is however overlooked in the scientific literature, resides in very transformations of the governance of public and private universities by the advent of this regional quality assurance policy. The apparent necessity of establishing these new procedures has been legitimised by the IUCEA regarding the challenge encountered by since the end of the 1990s: the massification of higher education. With the flourishing of public and private universities, one has witnessed the advent of a substantial regional higher education market. For example, Kenya currently has 25 public universities and 68 private ones; Uganda has 11 public and 33 private; Tanzania has 11 and 29. The decaying state of public institutions has freed up space in the higher education market due to the rise in demand. The private university has therefore positioned itself as a credible alternative to public higher education. This massification of higher education commits political leaders and universities to respond to the increase in the number of students. Kenya, for example, went from having 62,677 students enrolled in higher education in 2002 to 194,528 in 2013, an increase of around 210% in just over ten years. Yet, the increase in staff numbers brings into question the quality of outputs in private institutions as well as public. The IUCEA, within the framework of the EAC's framework, has therefore positioned itself as an institution that hopes to improve and harmonise the functioning of universities in the region.

By taking a position on sensitive policy subjects such as regional harmonisation of university tuition fees, the IUCEA shows that it has significant ambitions to oversee further reforms, whether these are in national policies or more local strategies. However, the IUCEA and the EAC do not yet possess the restrictive legislative framework to directly manage university policies in the region and to establish a harmonisation of university structures. Notably, the IUCEA does not yet own the budgetary or human resources for its ambitions and so must form numerous partnerships with foreign founders to lead these regional programmes. At first sight the IUCEA appears to be an empty shell, where historic public universities such as those of Nairobi, Makerere and Dar es Salaam are poorly represented. The IUCEA is instead co-opted by new universities, both private and public, that find visibility for themselves there. The semi-regular conferences that the IUCEA organises are not decisive spaces for public higher education policy where future transformations of institutions are discussed and played out—these meetings and seminars are, rather,

spaces for socialisation that allow political and administrative actors to meet each other, to exchange views, and to establish new partnerships.

The activities of the IUCEA, within the framework of the EAC, thus question the regionalisation of public higher education policies in East Africa. Regional integration promotes the dissemination of dominant theories on the reforms to be undertaken, a dynamic that is facilitated by the IUCEA's activities and by the movement of academics. However, harmonisation and regularisation of university systems in East Africa is still difficult to achieve. The case of quality assurance programmes that proliferate in the region is the exception. The most discussed example that illustrates the difficulty of implementing regional policy in the sector is, without any doubt, that of institutional economic models. Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda have public and private universities that have been marketised, where the majority of students pay tuition fees, whereas Tanzania and Burundi already have university systems largely subsidised by their governments. These set-ups are the results of policies and reforms inherited from different governments since these countries gained their independence. East African universities, under the guise of convergence—for example in new modes of governance—have nevertheless their own singularities, histories, and memories. There exists significant differences between public and private universities, to the extent that one can question the formation of a homogeneous East African university space, in particular on the very politicised issue of tuition fees. However, the regional space of the East African Community seems to be a coherent structure that is able to respond to the challenges of higher education. It is particularly the case that universities have become strategic institutions in the economic development of the region. This is evidenced by national programmes (Vision 2030 in Kenya and Vision 2045 in Uganda, for example) that allow universities to train qualified staff and to develop research capacities in strategic sectors (science, energy, management, etc.). This will involve a strengthening of the binding legal capacities of the IUCEA and the EAC and a budget consistent with their missions. These transformations can not be achieved without the common and shared willingness of all the different political leaders in the region.