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Regionalization and Higher Education Student Mobility in East Africa: Examination of Opportunities and Challenges from the Ugandan Context

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing trend toward regionalization as higher education adapts to openness and globalization. In response, East African countries formed networks and partnerships that strengthened business, higher education, student and staff mobility, and research. This is because regionalization is embedded in East Africa's economy, politics, culture, and social norms. In addition, regionalization is influenced by internationalization and globalization. It promises development opportunities, although challenges are inevitable. This paper examines the contributions of regional student mobility to East Africa's development. We use neoliberal and world systems theories to illuminate the advantages and disadvantages of regionalizing higher education and explain how partner states can maximize opportunities and minimize challenges. Data was collected through convenience sampling of two hundred international students and two staff members in international students' offices. Data analysis revealed that the regionalization of East African higher education reflects historical power relations; it has benefits though founded on inequalities.

Keywords: East Africa, internationalization, regionalization, student mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has intensified connections between people, governments, and institutions, leading researchers to examine the politics of globalization and its discourses. The movement of policies "from one country to another, from the global to the local, from the North to the South, or from the South to the South"

(Shields, 2013, p. 609) has interested many researchers in the past. Some researchers refer to regionalization as a "potent process of globalization" (Ndofirepi et al., 2017, p. 52). For others, regionalization is a constituent of internationalization resulting from globalization (Sehoole & Lee, 2021). Indeed, regionalization, globalization, and internationalization are complementary rather than contradictory forces shaping development (Knight, 2017).

Although regionalization is related to globalization and internationalization, the three concepts do not have everything in common and have been explored to varying degrees. While the threats and benefits of globalization (e.g., Deeks, 2021; Kirchhoff, 2017) and internationalization (e.g., Amutuhaire, 2020; Buckner, 2019; Huang & Daizen, 2018) have been extensively researched in different contexts, regionalization has not been fully explored in East Africa. Studies on regionalization have focused on Europe (e.g., Warleigh-Lack, 2014; Chou & Gornitzka, 2014) and Asia (e.g., Hammond, 2019; Knight, 2016), while few studies (Oanda & Matiang'i, 2018; Ndofirepi et al., 2017; Knight & Woldegiorgis, 2017) have focused on Africa. Even the few studies on regionalization in Africa ignore its potential benefits and threats.

Universities in Uganda have long educated East African students, including former presidents of those countries, e.g., Julius Nyerere and Benjamin Mkapa of Tanzania, Mwai Kibaki of Kenya, Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Paul Kagame of Rwanda (Ricart-Huguet, 2022). However, the influence of international students on East Africa's regionalization dynamics has not been fully explored, as there is insufficient literature on the subject. Our paper narrows this knowledge vacuum through analysis of empirical data. Moreover, as conceptualized in this paper, regionalization should be examined in cognizance of its relationship with internationalization and globalization to grasp its impact on development fully. Neoliberal and world systems theories (Section 3.1) help us understand that such forces influence student mobility.

Using the East African Common Higher Education Area (EACHEA), we explore the regionalization of higher education (HE) in East Africa (EA) and analyze how HE student mobility influences development. After the introduction, the paper conceptually and theoretically reviews literature pertinent to regionalization. Critical analysis of regionalization using Neoliberal and World Systems theories, the study's methodology, findings, and discussion then follow. The conclusions come last.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the paper's concepts and regionalization of HE in EA, together with the threats and opportunities of regionalization.

Conceptual Review

Today's world is shaped by two contradictory yet complementary processes: globalization and regionalization (Hutson et al., 2011). *Globalization* is the process of worldwide densification driven by market expansion, a global

production pattern, cultural homogenization, fragmentation, and functional logic (Huang et al., (2019). Therefore, globalization refers to a world order in which nation-states no longer exist (Liodakis, 2010). On the other hand, *regionalization* is a political-administrative process in which regions emerge as relevant units of analysis for economic and political activities and for providing welfare and services (Brockett et al., 2004). As such, regionalization aims at fragmentation based on regional differences and reflects the polycentric nature of the world economy (Jenicek, 2002). Globalization and regionalization are distinct, though interdependent; they reinforce and contradict each other at different times (Hettne et al., 1999).

Sehoole & Lee (2021) refer to regionalization as a subset of internationalization, while Ogachi (2009) claims that the increasing regionalization of HE is an adaptation to internationalization. With regionalization and internationalization, HEIs have diversified their funding, specialized in particular content and teaching methods, promoted assessment and accreditation mechanisms, or supported student and staff mobility, Ogachi adds. Thus, regionalization is a strategic area of internationalization (Hammond, 2019), through which resources and talents are pooled to enhance the economic and scientific potentials that shape development (Strielkowski et al., 2021).

Thus, there is conceptual overlap between globalization, internationalization, and regionalization (Qadri et al., 2019) which complicates their evaluation. Indeed, the benefits and challenges of student mobility can be linked to regionalization, internationalization or globalization. This study explores the contributions of EACHEA, a regional rather than global program that facilitates student mobility within EA, for a better understanding of the three concepts.

Familiar with regionalization is establishing common HE areas through which regions support academic cooperation and knowledge exchanges to improve the quality and relevance of HE services in society (Knight, 2016; Knight, 2013). This occurs through mutual recognition of qualifications, common HE quality standards, regional credit transfer systems, and the mobility of students and staff. These activities influence how students – the beneficiaries of regionalization of HE – perceive regionalization. Students' perceptions provide a basis for assessing the interaction between student mobility and regionalization to bring about development, as this paper holds. Perceptions, for example, about tuition fees, the language of instruction, and the cost of living in a given country influence regional student flows (Killingley & Ilieva, 2015). Exploring such factors informs regional development, e.g., by establishing education hubs (Albia & Chan, 2017).

Regionalization of Higher Education in East Africa

This section reviews the link between East Africa's regionalization through EACHEA and colonialism and Europe's Bologna Process.

Colonial Influence of Regionalization in East Africa

Historical factors (such as colonialism) influence students' mobility (Riaño et al., 2018). During colonial times, Makerere University in Uganda remained the only HEI in EA for long and trained students from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania (Oanda & Matiang'i, 2018). East African students continue to study in Uganda, such that Uganda is the leading destination for international students in East Africa. Uganda hosts about 20,000 international students, mainly from EA (National Council for Higher Education, NCHE, 2022).

Further, colonial ties between countries within a region influence students' mobility (Glass & Cruz, 2023). According to ICEF Monitor (2017), Uganda's international students are mainly from Kenya (70%) and Tanzania (12%) - former British colonies like Uganda. English as the language of teaching in the three countries is also a unifying factor. With this view, and considering foreigners' influence during establishment of the EACHEA (Oanda & Matiang'i, 2018), EA's regionalization seems a 'reconstruction of the colonial empire'. In line with the claims by Glass & Cruz (2023), the regionalization of East Africa's HE is entangled in the region's historical and colonial legacy. This issue did not interest past researchers and was analyzed in this paper.

Bologna Process and Regionalization in East Africa

Europe's Bologna Process (BP) pioneered regional HE cooperation, and provided a model for EA's regionalization (Knight & Woldegiorgis, 2017). This is diffusion through which the BP in Europe stimulated regionalization in other parts of the world (Chou & Ravinet, 2017). However, this is

"Eurocentric and simplistic argument that assumes that diffusion is unidirectional and all-powerful. It overlooks endogenous regional developments as symbolic of that region's particularities and preferred ways of doing things" (Chou & Ravinet, 2017, p. 144).

Further, the BP is a mechanism through which Europe intends to extend its hegemony worldwide (Figueroa, 2010). This paper analyzes regionalization's attributes, considering EA's contextual factors. It is argued in this paper that the regional efforts must reflect students' interests since they are the primary beneficiaries of regional cooperation in HE.

Threats and Opportunities from Regionalization

Regionalization addresses political, economic and social-cultural goals that are often articulated by stakeholders internal and external to HE (Knight, 2017). This blurs the entities that drive regionalization and its purpose. However, the growth in regionalization of HE is attributed to its potential benefits, but its intended and unintended consequences also exist (Knight, 2017). Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck (2015) explain that regionalization promotes students' participation; it also shapes HEIs in line with market forces and makes education

a tradable item (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013). This relates to the neoliberal perspectives of regionalization explored in this paper.

Regionalization intensifies intra-regional social and economic interactions (Goltermann et al., 2012), and provides opportunities for deepening cooperation in education and social-cultural development prospects (Mok, 2016). This has been witnessed with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which enhanced the Asia-Pacific economic cooperation and promoted dialogue and consultation on political and security issues in the region. Knight (2017) agrees with this idea and holds that regionalization encourages collaboration and exchange and that such activities stimulate regional development. However, more robust HE systems may develop imperial interests through this process, just like political entities seeking territories for commercial purposes (Oanda & Matiang'I, 2018). They may seek to reshape less developed HE systems to expand areas for recruiting students, academics, and researchers for commercial interests (Van der Wende, 2017), reproducing power imbalances between the partners. We explore this state of affairs of EA's regionalization in line with this issue.

According to Hettne (1999), there are different dimensions of regionalization, such as cultural identity, economic and political uniformity, peace, and security. However, following decades of colonization that estranged Africans from their natural identity, causing a moral crisis (Eegunlusi, 2017), reconstruction of the African identity becomes timely. However, as Igwilo & Ogbo (2018) explain, developing an African identity is difficult given the African people's different ethnicities, cultural practices, languages, and customs. A regional approach to the process allows Africans to restore their lost identity, create their future, and reclaim their lost integrity - a vital part of decolonization (Ezebuilo, 2020).

Intra-regional student mobility, which is an aspect of the regionalization of HE (Knight, 2017) is witnessed in EA though it is unequal, with Uganda accounting for the largest share (Odebero, 2015). This is due to the aggressive recruitment practices for international students exhibited by Ugandan universities and competition (ICEF Monitor, 2017). Thus, commercialization and unhealthy competition drive student mobility in EA (Ogachi, 2009) yet threaten research output, academic quality, and the social environment (Gao, 2021). Further, brain drain, inequitable participation, and the colonial legacy of languages can be worsened by regionalization (Knight, 2017). Thus, while regionalization has benefits, threats also exist, making it a contradictory process whose benefits and challenges are evaluated in this paper.

Theorizing Regional Student Mobility

This section discusses theoretical perspectives of regionalization and highlights their implications for student mobility. We discuss Neoliberalism and World systems theory.

Neoliberal Theory

Manning (2002) defines neoliberalism as a political and economic theory that favors free trade, deregulation, globalization, and reduced government spending. It favors free markets, privatization, and service deregulation (Hursh, 2017). It is associated with reduced governmental intervention in economic and social affairs, competition, rational choice, the global knowledge economy, and the instrumental view of education for private economic gain (Bamberger et al., 2019). The same features characterize EA's regionalization and common markets protocol, which decreased trade barriers in products and services such as education (EAC, 2009).

We used neoliberalism to explain the economic practices characterizing the regionalization of East Africa's HE. For example, the drivers of regionalizing student mobility in EA are more commercial than humanistic. Due to such reasons, Uganda has created avenues for admitting many international students and maximizing income generation. In 2010, Uganda aimed to earn $60m (135bnUGX) from international students (Maseruka, 2010). Such intentions reduce international students to being 'cash cows,' which is less humanistic (Lomer, 2014).

Further, universities in Uganda (Akabwai, 2014) and Kenya (Maina, 2017) have intensively advertised and branded themselves. Such are, however, illegitimate practices for HE (Stein, 2018); they breed competition and oppose the cooperative ideals of regionalization (Knight, 2017). Competition is further demonstrated by the relevance given to university rankings (Marginson, 2010), which do not necessarily indicate high quality but are mainly perceptions of reputation (Brankovic, 2021).

The neoliberal orientations of regionalization that were ignored by past studies (e.g., Oanda & Matiang'i, 2018; Ogachi, 2009) are highlighted in this study. Regionalization informed by the market forces, for example, led to Uganda's universities setting lower tuition fees than the regional universities (Kigotho, 2014). Such practices transform universities into businesses (Wu & Naidoo, 2016), opening up for predatory international student recruitment (Hulme et al., 2014) and the formation of branch campuses, which are often of inferior quality (Chou & Ravinet, 2017).

World Systems Theory

World economies are categorized into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral (Rodrigue, 2020). The core consists of the dominant capitalist, industrialized and urbanized countries. The peripheral countries are less industrialized, run agrarian economies, have low literacy rates and technological advancement, and depend on the core countries for capital. The semi-peripheral countries lie in between the core and peripheral countries. World Systems Theory **(**WST) advances that a country's integration into the world's capitalistic system determines its level of economic development (Wallerstein, 1974).

WST holds that global processes are neither egalitarian nor consensual (Shields, 2013). Thus, regionalization propagates self-serving and capitalistic

interests for example through the commodification of knowledge hence contradicting the broader development intentions (Khajbakhteev, 2020). The paper clarifies the capitalistic orientations in EA's regionalization. While WST mainly describes global economies, its postulations are portrayed in EA. For example, the first three members of the EAC benefited from the colonial governments which established HEIs in these countries. The institutions transitioned into the region's most reputable HEIs currently. Since quality is a significant driver of international student mobility, these universities are regionally the most popular destinations for mobile students. Partner states without such reputable institutions are senders rather than receivers of international students. Thus, unequal power relations (from coloniality) shape EA's student mobility.

Further, the said countries inherited the use of English in their education systems. English is the primary language of science and technology (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015), and "Mastering the English language is indispensable for success in a globalizing economy" (Forster & Mellström, 2018, p. 107). This exemplifies the hegemonic power of the English Language, and a country's capacity to administer academic programs in English determines and informs the trends of student flow in that country. That is why the significant players in EA's student mobility are Kenya and Uganda (ICEF Monitor, 2017), which use English.

METHODOLOGY

We used a mixed methods approach in a case study design to collect and analyze quantitative data from Makerere University (MU) and Kampala International University (KIU) which were purposively selected as cases. MU is Uganda's public university with the most international students (NCHE, 2011). It is also the largest, most traditional, most highly recognized, and oldest public university with the longest history of admitting international students in EA (Sicherman, 2008). KIU is a private university described as the top South-South foreign student-enrolling university in East Africa (Ssempebwa et al., 2012).
These attributes make the two universities the most appropriate study sites.

The study population consisted of international students from MU & KIU from which a sample consisted of 200 international students was selected through convenience sampling in line with Cohen et al. (2007)'s recommendation that a survey study requires at least 100 respondents in each main category of the study population. International students in MU & KIU were sent an e-mail questionnaire, and the first 100 questionnaires returned from each university were used for data analysis. Seven interviews were conducted with international students and university staff in charge of international students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the study's findings. Since convenience sampling was used, we acknowledge that the findings have limited

generalizability and validity. The results also do not depict a causal relationship between variables since we never used correlation and regression analysis.

Benefits of Regionalization

Table 1 shows the descriptive data about the benefits of regionalization as perceived by international students:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Positive Influences of Regionalization of HE

Indicator	SD Count (%)	D Count (%)	U Count (%)	A Count (%)	SA Count (%)	Mean Count	Remarks about the influence
Regionalization concretized my identity as an African	05 (2.5)	14 (7.0)	40 (20)	59 (29.5)	82 (41)	3.99	Agreed
Regionalization protects and promotes my socio-economic and political interests as an East African.	5 (2.5)	31 (15.5)	7 (3.5)	37 (18.5)	120 (60)	4.18	Agreed
Regionalization promotes HE development	00 (0.0)	43 (21.5)	14 (7)	87 (43.5)	56 (28.0)	3.78	Agreed
Regionalization promotes HE research	61 (30.5)	43 (21.5)	51 (25.5)	20 (10.0)	25 (12.5)	2.53	Undecided
Regionalization of HE through students mobility generates revenue for the host country	00 (0.0)	00 (0.0)	03 (1.5)	28 (14)	169 (84.5)	4.79	Agreed
Regionalization helps to solve educational crises in some countries	00 (0.0)	00 (0.0)	02 (01)	132 (66)	66 (33)	4.32	Agreed

Note. *SD* = Strongly Disagree, *D* = Disagree, *U* = Undecided, *A* = Agree, *SA* = Strongly Agree.

Over 98% of the respondents indicated that regionalization generates revenues for HEIs enrolling regional students. International students pay higher fees than national students and thus provide an alternative source of revenue for HEIs (Cantwell, 2015). Many international students in a university mean higher revenues. This explains the excessive advertising and other commercialization activities in East Africa's HEIs (Akabwai, 2014; Maina, 2017), which qualifies the neoliberal dimension in EA's regionalization. However, such a disposition threatens equity; high tuition associated with the commercialized HE is unaffordable to students from lower social-economic backgrounds (Amutuhaire, 2023). Thus, commercial intentions in HE undermine the purpose of regionalization (Ogachi, 2009) and defeat the public-good aims of HE (Marginson, 2018). Additionally, the tuition fee policy that requires international students to pay in US dollars rather than Ugandan Shillings maximizes forex trade earnings. A Kenyan interviewee had this to say:

> "I pay high fees and every time I have to pay, I convert Kenyan Shillings into dollars rather than Ugandan Shillings yet dollars are more expensive compared to Ugandan shillings".

Universities in Uganda offer their educational programs cheaply (Herrmann, 2013), but this negatively affects the quality of education. Ogachi (2009) explained that universities in Uganda have compromised "on quality to attract a higher number of regional students through lower tuition fees and admission requirements" (p.340). The Kenyan Commission on university education was once concerned about the doctoral degrees obtained from KIU (Ngalomba & Bacwayo, 2015). However, high-quality HE is desirable for EA's development and for the promotion of student mobility. EA must boost the global ranking of universities and also consider other possibilities, such as the institutionalization of flexible visa regulations to become globally competitive and competent (see Universities UK, 2014; Beech, 2018).

A regional quality assurance framework for HEIs was established to improve East Africa's HE quality standards (IUCEA, 2010). The exercise involved IUCEA, German Academic Exchange Service, the German Rectors Conference, and National Commissions, or Councils for HE (AUC/EU, 2014). Some of these parties are external to EA; ensuring that their interests do not override issues pertinent to EA's development remains essential.

Respondents were undecided about the role of the regionalization of HE in research (Mean =2.53). Most of the respondents were undergraduates, and had minimum interest in research. Further, EA's research is underdeveloped (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023) to provide respondents with an explicit opinion. EA has a poor research infrastructure in terms of resources, staff, and funding (Jowi & Obamba, 2013); For example, there is a low number of doctorates to conduct research in Uganda (Kasozi, 2019) and Rwanda (Habarurema, 2019). Indeed, the depicted indecision points to questionable research services in EA since international students usually have unequal access to resources than national students (Waters &Leung, 2013) which influences their perceptions about service provision in such universities. Regionalization is yet to improve research capacity

in EA's universities. If the claims by Maina (2017) and Akabwai (2014) are anything to go by, universities should invest in high-quality research as much as they do in advertising to recruit international students (Beech, 2015).

However, regionalization promotes research collaborations as reported by one of the interviewees:

> "…regionalization allows research collaborations on personal and institutional levels hence facilitating knowledge generation."

The same respondent mentioned a joint PhD project involving students and staff from MU, the University of Nairobi (Kenya), Sokoine University of Agriculture (Tanzania) that facilitated training and co-supervision of doctoral students. Therefore, regionalization can facilitate institutional engagement in regional knowledge flows, allowing them to improve teaching and administrative methods through benchmarking and sharing experiences (Choi, 2017). Similarly, the Eastern and Southern Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence project is anticipated to strengthen academic research centers in the region, deliver quality post-graduate education and develop globally engaged and collaborative research capacity (IUCEA, 2019). This will moderate brain drain and contribute Africa's growth by increasing the number of researchers and scholars in the region.

Over 70% of the respondents indicated that regionalization strengthens their African identity. Studying in a regional university is an opportunity to develop their African identity which is essential for decolonization (Ezebuilo, 2020). Such should be complemented with advances in research to decolonize knowledge and improve self-determination (Smith, 2012). Low research output from Africa has sustained Eurocentric knowledge and its hegemony (Crawford et al., 2021). High-quality research conducted by regional knowledge hubs and institutions contributes to the 'undoing' of coloniality. Thus, while decolonization is not the explicit intention of regionalization in EA, it is implicit. It is an intention that HEIs can incorporate into research and teaching and confront colonial practices. This will address the inaccurate stereotypes spread about Africa by researchers focusing on negative social issues (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

All respondents indicated that regionalization could help partners to overcome the educational difficulties. This is because, as Choi (2017) suggests, regional students can pursue the desired academic fields in regional universities. In line with view, an interviewee from MU revealed that:

> "…some countries for example Rwanda are still developing capacity to teach some courses at postgraduate levels; through regionalization, students from such countries can find courses of their choice in regional universities."

This response makes sense since Ngalomba & Bacwayo (2015) indicated that HE facilities in some East African countries are inadequate in infrastructure, fields of study, and study programs. Indeed, some East African countries have limited capacity to provide specific courses and programs at different levels. A case in point is Burundi, which started offering doctoral training in 2017 (Sawahel, 2017). The doctoral school is in its infancy and may not meet the country's doctoral

training needs. Similarly, Rwanda is still developing capacity training in medical-related fields and post-graduate training at the desired level (Trines, 2019).

This situation makes regionalization relevant since students are trained in regional settings, allowing them to gain knowledge and abilities not available in their home universities. This opportunity ties in nicely with the study's findings, whereby over 71% of the respondents indicated that regionalization fosters HE development by attracting and retaining students at home rather than forcing them to study outside the region (Knight, 2017).

Threats Associated With the Regionalization of Higher Education

The study investigated the risks associated with regionalization and interviewees indicated that "regionalization is a gamble with many benefits and risks. Kol (2019) agrees, arguing that regionalization is a challenge that nations must face; the nations must work together to maximize the benefits while addressing the problems. Table 5.2 shows quantitative study findings:

Table 5.2: Descriptive Statistics on Threats of Regionalization of HE

Indicator	SA Count (%)	D Count (%)	U Count (%)	A Count (%)	SA Count (%)	Mean	Remark
Regionalization threatens national culture	00 (00)	09 (4.5)	42 (21)	55 (27.5)	103 (51.5)	4.40	Agreed
Regionalization continues marginalization of some nations	04 (2)	05 (2.5)	10 (5)	93 (46.5)	88 (44)	4.28	Agreed
Regionalization encourages brain drain some nations	10 (5)	21 (10.5)	12 (6)	86 (43)	71 (35.5)	3.94	Agreed
Regionalization of HE leads to unhealthy competition	15 (7.5)	08 (4)	91 (45.5)	55 (27.5)	31 (15.5)	3.40	Undecided
Regionalization of HE separates regional institutions from the world	18 (9)	32 (16)	58 (29)	37 (18.5)	55 (27.5)	3.40	Undecided

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree, *D* = Disagree, *U* = Undecided, *A* = Agree, *SA* = Strongly Agree.

Respondents (78.5%) identified human capital loss through brain drain as one of the risks from regionalization. Regionalization enables some countries to attract and retain brilliant regional students, and some may not return to their home countries (Knight, 2017). Ette & Witte (2021) interpret this process as 'brain circulation' or 'brain sharing,' but sometimes total 'brain losses' occur (Knight & Woldegiorgis, 2017). Brain drain reduces a country's talent pool and jeopardizes development. This replicates the 'center-periphery' scenario seen with inappropriate internationalization (O'Donnell & Hutchison, 2011). Countries hosting international students become regional skills' *centers* while countries 'supplying' international students become dependent on the center in terms of technologies, expertise, goods, and services (hence termed *peripheries*). Such a relationship is neocolonial yet regional integration should afford comparable participation and benefit of all partners. Student flows that follow definite patterns facilitate uneven ('center-periphery') regional growth.

However, Africa's brain drain and talent migration will not stop without addressing the under-employment situation for graduates (ILO, 2021). As graduates search for suitable employment opportunities away from their home countries, the ethics in regionalization become tested. Labor migration denotes a loss on investment for home economies since the graduates do not involve in the economic growth of their home countries.

Further, the study shows that regionalization has deepened inequalities in East Africa's HE. This finding supports the ICEF Monitor (2017) report that Kenya and Uganda are the popular destinations for international students in EA. Out of the 63 holders of the EAC 2022/2023 student mobility scholarships, Rwanda and Burundi hosted no student from the sister East African countries while Uganda hosted 17 scholars from other East African countries (EAC, 2022). Thus, regionalization benefits Uganda and Kenya more than other partners. For the rest of the EAC, this signifies a loss of economic and social gains associated with student mobility.

The study also indicated that regionalization sparked competition for mobile students among regional institutions. An employee from reports:

"…we have recruitment offices in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Sudan." Our staff in these locations advise students about admission and the academic programs in our campuses. We also provide quality information on our websites to enable us to attract international students from many places."

With such practices, international students' recruitment strategies used by Ugandan institutions have been described as *aggressive* and such are being adopted by other regional universities (ICEF Monitor, 2017) hence entrenching competition. While competition has some advantages (e.g., encouraging institutions to improve the quality of programs, student facilities, and research output), some risks result from 'unhealthy competition.' For example, student mobility founded on competition for economic can divert HEIs from quality service provision.

As East African universities compete for international students, there is a worldwide talent war (Menz, 2016). Industrialized countries are reshaping their

policies and emphasizing quality service provision to retain highly competent foreign graduates (Geddie, 2015). The best East African students and graduates may not return if they study in the developed world. However, as a developing region, EA must invest in human capital development; it should focus on attracting and retaining its best talent instead of losing it to other regions.

Respondents also indicated that regionalization threatens national cultures by pushing dominant partners' cultures at the expense of those from weaker partners. A South Sudanese student who grew up in Kenya and is currently studying in Uganda stated,

> "I am now more fluent in English and Swahili than my mother tongue. I may never master my mother tongue."

This view is explained by Woldegiorgis (2017) that regionalization encourages standardization and homogenization, destroying cultural variations at the expense of those promoted by the dominant partners. This response suggests that English and Swahili; the dominant languages in EA have marginalized indigenous languages. Thus, regionalization potentially destroys cultural identities while propagating cultures from the more powerful regional participants (Knight, 2017).

Respondents were undecided (Mean =3.40) about regionalization isolating regional HEIs. Regionalization increases regional institutional collaboration (Table 5.1). Therefore, institutions may find it difficult to collaborate beyond regional borders. While this is possible, regionalization improves the quality of regional universities making them attractive to international students, researchers, and funders (Craciun et al., 2023). Thus, rather than getting isolated, regional universities become connected globally. That is why the in charge of the international students' office at MU indicated that:

> "…regionalization will make EA's universities strong and fit to participate in and benefit from internationalization."

Indeed, participating in internationalization links HEIs to others around the world.

Conclusion

The study looked at regionalization as a process working with globalization and internationalization. It discusses several points of view on student mobility as the primary form of regionalization of HE. Regionalization offers numerous benefits as a growing trend. Still, its negative consequences must be considered— the advantages of regionalizing HE includes resolving educational challenges amongst partner countries and developing African identity. Brain drain and unequal participation were identified as threats.

The benefits and risks of regionalization are influenced by contextual differences such as national history, culture, and politics. To maximize the benefits, such differences must be addressed. Although there are several reasons for promoting student mobility, economic reasons are prominent. Promoting student mobility primarily for economic reasons is counterproductive. It perpetuates the colonial past, encourages unhealthy competition, and jeopardizes

educational quality. Mobility should improve on the quality of HE services since that is what the region needs most.

Recommendations

To minimize the challenges and maximize the benefits of regionalization, nations and institutions must prioritize investments in science and technology to foster creativity and innovation, create more jobs, and reduce unemployment and outward labor migration. Further, while the BP was the prototype for the regionalization of EA, its insights must be applied in new ways given EE's contextual factors. Using the BP without adapting it to the East African context may harm regional economies through 'Europeanization.'

As regionalization adapts to new trends, realities, and opportunities, stakeholders must rethink what it entails and formulate policies benefiting all partners. Curricular convergence through the development of common reference points for academic programs and disciplinary frameworks is a crucial area of focus, as it will facilitate collaboration in curriculum innovation, research, student mobility, and mutual recognition of qualifications.

The paper also recommends conversations about uneven political, economic, and cultural connections to address threats of marginalization, isolation, and unhealthy competition about student mobility. EA's historical and unequal power relationships have afforded advantages to specific nations at the disadvantage of others, discouraging effective integration. The commonalities and differences between countries, institutions, staff, and students must be acknowledged and factored in to devise relevant and tailored regionalization responses.

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