

CASE STUDY: FACULTY EXCHANGE PROGRAM: EXPERIENCES BY A KENYAN IN GERMANY

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Introduction

I had an opportunity to visit Germany in 2016/2017 during which period I was on an exchange staff program between the University of Nairobi, Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg, University of Applied Sciences, Germany, and the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. My visit took me to the city of Bonn where the University of Bonn-Rhein-Sieg is located in the suburban area in the cities of Sankt Augustin, Rheinbach, and Hennef. I was able to interact with faculty members and students. During this period, the discussion I had with faculty mainly focused on various programs offered by the university and how they have been able to interact and partner with the industry and create linkages with various firms in Germany. It emerged from our discussion that the development of the curriculum by the university depends on such partnerships.

Different Approaches to University Education

There is a difference in education systems between Kenya and Germany. In Germany, universities do not necessarily produce graduates and deliver them en masse to the labor market but instead customize graduates. They are prepared to work for firms in the larger economy since their training is based on the needs of such firms. It is apparent that most of the graduates in Germany are better equipped to fit industry needs. This is a different scenario in Kenya where the education system works against Kenyan graduates, the majority of which are job seekers; they are ill prepared to occupy positions in the industry since they

lack the skills required to work in the industry and many of them can thus not be absorbed in the economy.

During the exchange program, I was able to work closely with both undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Sankt Augustin campus and my experience was that classes are generally smaller compared to the large number of students in Kenyan classes where I serve as a professor. It is easier for lecturers to interact freely with students and thus promote a sound environment for learning. By comparison, this is not the case in Kenya since the number of students per class is fairly large and it sometimes becomes difficult to lecture students in such an environment with congestion and interruption. Many students do not listen to their lecturers in such a situation and are unable to engage in meaningful discussion. However, the majority of Kenyan students are proficient in the English language thereby making them excel in classwork compared to their German counterparts. I realized that only a few postgraduate students were able to communicate well in English. Students at the undergraduate and postgraduate level often cannot express themselves clearly in English and even at the postgraduate level, where the mode of instruction is the English language, they are challenged by low levels of proficiency. A number of faculty members could not express themselves well in English. This was a major limitation for a number of international students who are required to learn German before they are enrolled in various programs at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. It is my view that lecturers and professors in Germany should be trained to communicate in English because Germany, besides being the European largest economy, also occupies a global focal position and has of late attracted a number of non-German speaking people the majority of whom come from Africa and Asia where English is spoken. This, therefore, requires that other nationals are integrated into the German education system.

Practic-Oriented Learning and Student's Expectations

With regard to student learning, expectation, and grading, it came to my attention during my visit that the majority of German students have been exposed to learning by simulation and case studies which also includes regular visits to various multinational firms which have been able to expose the students to real-world practical experience.

We were able to visit major multinationals like the BMW manufacturing plant in Munich, the Microsoft group of companies, and DHL. The students were keen to learn how those companies operate in the commercial and technological environment. It is clear that the expectations of German students are focused on the job training where they are graded based on regular visits to different firms as opposed to the Kenyan system where students, even though their expectations are high and ambitious, are not able to realize their dreams since there are limited by many challenges. Most of the universities are academically oriented and lack partnerships with the industry hence making it difficult to produce high-caliber graduates for the labor market. Most learning and research in such institutions begins and ends in the classroom. Students are taught how to pass exams and not how to apply what

they have learned to the real working environment. That has raised much concern and there has been a national debate and conversation in Kenya on whether graduates are up to the task of working and becoming productive in the labor market.

This concern has been so strong that in 2018, the Government of Kenya began the process of transforming the higher education sector which may change the focus of university learning in Kenya. The ongoing debate on refocusing university education centers around industry needs and emerging societal challenges in the areas of science, technical subjects, engineering, and mathematics.

Lessons Learned

There were many learning points as a result of the exchange program between the two universities across different international borders which revolve around culture. That Germany as an industrialized country has put much effort on technological development as compared to Kenya which is an emerging economy and still struggling to get its focus right and therefore does not offer many opportunities for students to exploit. With that in mind, exposure to the industrial environment is moving at a very slow pace for most of the University of Nairobi students compared to Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg, University of Applied Sciences. However, it is envisaged that in the near future, Kenyans will catch up to their counterparts given the fast economic growth that Kenya is currently experiencing.

I learned that most of the academic faculties are well paid and compensated by the universities they serve making their graduates highly qualified in opposite to the regular strikes witnessed in most of the Kenyan universities including the University of Nairobi where most of the lecturers are poorly paid. I further learned that the German government is keen to finance most university initiatives in full making higher education in Germany almost free as compared to the Kenyan situation where universities are struggling to survive.

My experience during this tour was that universities do not just offer courses and training haphazardly, but that every single university across Germany offers specific courses where they have resources, competency, and capability by their mandate. This is not true in Kenya where most universities are established to replicate courses offered by their sister institutions. Kenyan universities must therefore start being unique and innovative to match the best universities in the world so that they can produce a globally high-level workforce.