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Practitioner Inquiry

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FINAL PROJECT:

SHAPING GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN REPUTABLE UNIVERSITIES AND HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN RWANDA.

Introduction:

My problem of practice will focus on promoting and raising awareness about the power of internationalization of higher education. First and foremost, there is need to understand the definition of internationalization by Jane knight of 2004 “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society (de Wit et al. [2015](#), European Parliament Study). To put it simply it refers to initiatives and activities that are conducted in higher education institutions framed by multilateral agreements to expand their reach over national borders.

More broadly, internationalization activities are categorized as either home or abroad. Internationalization abroad, or cross-border education, relates to educational activities abroad (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Stella, 2006) and has a variety of types of which are mentioned in the above paragraph. “Internationalization at home is more curriculum-oriented and focuses on activities that develop international or global understanding and intercultural skills” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 45).

The one particularly of interest to my study is the modernized method for internationalization at home through fully online or online blended programs. For example, Auschner (2020) explains that universities need to prepare their graduates for working across countries and cultures and have been focusing on the international and intercultural aspect of their programs. Furthermore, “research has shown, however, that the development of intercultural competence in students does not happen automatically but needs to be fostered and supported. Within an action research project, an intercultural group work was designed to foster the development of intercultural competence of business students in an international double-degree program.” (Auschner,2020).

Within the two categories of internationalization (home and abroad), there are specific forms of internationalization which includes joint research projects, student exchange programs, staff mobility projects, specially designed programs for foreign students, joint curriculum development initiatives, branch campuses by exporting higher education and institutional cooperation through transnational university networks including mergers of institutions and transnational virtual delivery of higher education.

The objective of Internationalization is to boost academic quality and development (de Wit, 2018). Furthermore, from an economic standpoint, internationalization serves as a means of preparing individuals for work in a globalized economy, promoting national development and competition, and generating extra-institutional financial gain. While on the political spectrum, internationalization promotes an understanding of peace and security in a controversial world and the development of worldwide citizenship.

Problem of Practice:

As a refresher, we learned that problems of practice are defined as persistent, contextualized and specific (to an) issue, embedded in the work of a professional practitioner and addressing a specific problem that can result in improved understanding, outcome and impact. A problem of practice dissertation is a professional Ed. D. dissertation in practice embedded in the work of a researcher-practitioner, often designed to solve a real-world problem in addition to increasing understanding on a broader scale (CPED, 2020). While thinking of my problem of practice, I had to ensure it is relevant to my eco system and mainly my home country. Hence the choice of focusing on the internationalization of higher education abroad. There is a problem of limited university global partnerships within the East African region, therefore, it needs to be amplified to improve the overall quality of universities in Rwanda. Creating partnerships with world class universities by setting up branch campuses, increasing faculty research collaboration, strengthening student exchange programs, offering fully online degree programs among others in Rwanda is going to significantly impact its tertiary education.

In depth, my problem of practice will identify strategic steps to increase successful global higher education partnerships with the help of technology for Rwanda and other East African countries. The ultimate objective is to unlock barriers to secure international partnerships. There are still significant gaps in the shaping of university partnerships within East African countries, namely Rwanda, we can do more with creating partnerships that address the gaps within the HLI's. These gaps allow for advancement and shaping collaborative university partnerships across the world to strengthen the quality of education through faculty collaboration, administrative diversity, and student exposure, to name a few. Additionally, these partnerships can partially be executed through technology such as online blended learning (OBL).

Lanford (2014) explains that global partnerships should marshal their significant intellectual and financial resources to enlarge public discourse, promote the public good, and support marginalized individuals. Global partnerships can address restrictions on scientific inquiry, public debate, the dissemination of public scholarship, and the development of deeper intercultural understanding through interaction and communication. Holistically, global higher education partnerships must meaningfully engage with the local Rwandan community and the regional communities. My personal research interests align with Kent State University vision statement: “To be recognized as a global leader embracing a unique synergy of aeronautics, engineering, and technologies that inspires our diverse talent to innovate, impact and improve life, making the universe more accessible and the opportunities for our students immeasurable.”, the problem for my practice is that not enough attention is given to university partnerships in Rwanda and creating global opportunities for universities to collaborate and thrive is paramount to having quality higher education.

It is worth noting that some leaders within education have embraced the significance of international partnerships in higher education while others are reluctant to take the leap towards greater collaboration for enhanced impact within universities and positive benefits globally. Partnerships involve organizational joint ventures that may go by any number of names (strategic alliances, joint ventures, collaborations, partnerships, to name a few). These initiatives can take several forms—between or among institutions, through departmental alliances across institutions, or with university programs that pair with businesses or community agencies. This is a problem that my practice will address.

Purpose of the Study:

My study on the internationalization of higher education and virtualization takes into consideration several factors that need to be analyzed globally, continentally (within the African context), at a national level (in Rwanda) and within institutional settings such as the National University of Rwanda. Moshtari & Safarpour (2023) describe it accurately stating that it becomes more crucial to push the boundaries of science to develop new technologies and important global initiatives, internationalization can be instrumental in helping underdeveloped countries overcome challenges such as poverty, climate change, and educational inequalities.

Higher education institutions have faced challenges in the process of internationalization, at a global scale but for the sake of my study, more precisely in Rwanda. Generally, internationalization has occupied scholarly attention in recent decades, but little research has been conducted on the internationalization of higher education in less developed African countries. The purpose of my study is to shed light on the strategies, frameworks and approaches that can be used to promote internationalization and virtualization of higher education in Rwanda and East Africa in order to improve the quality of higher education.

There is huge potential for East African universities to deepen, strengthen and expand global partnership opportunities with world class reputable universities. Also, it is to be recognized that our universities have milestones to attain before reaching the level of universities abroad. This starts with having proper and functional organizational unit structures in place (among other factors), for instance, a global expansion unit that makes internationalization implementable. For this to happen, internationalization and virtualization has to be studied specifically within the Rwanda context to better understand strategies that can ensure successful partnerships.

Practically speaking, several universities in the region encountered obstacles in enhancing their teaching and research capabilities. Many institutions are currently significantly short of trained scientific staff, organizational infrastructure, research equipment, and sustainable power and internet availability. While the region suffers from brain drain to developed countries, institutions are expected to remedy problems related to development, destitution, and the provision of specialists such as medical doctors, professors, and engineers (Tan et al., 2021).

Research Questions:

My problem of practice that will shape my study about how internationalization of higher education lacks clear strategies both at the national and the institutional level. At the level of national policy making, huge differences exist between countries in the elaboration of internationalization policies. Which leads to my research questions as follows;

- Which policy frameworks and strategies have to be put in place at a national and university level as a guiding document for internationalization of higher education?
 - Specificities in regulation, standards and quality have to be clearly identified in order to provide guidance to university leadership and to reach the ultimate goal of internationalization i.e. boosting quality education, increased job and entrepreneurial opportunities and global development.
- Can transnational university networks; institutional mergers through branch campuses and online learning enable efficient organizational structures for internationalization?
 - The organizational structure of universities should be formed in accordance with internationalization strategies (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023).

Positionality:

As the main author, I am at the core of my research study including the methodology and procedure as well as having an insider-outsider perspective regarding the internationalization of Higher Learning Institutions. Being the Chief Skills Officer at Rwanda Development Board from 2019 to 2023, has broadened my network in the education system whether in Rwanda, regionally as well as globally to some extent. It provided me with an opening to create partnerships between world leading universities in North America, Australia, Europe and the National University of Rwanda (UR).

This networking opportunity will enable easier access of information and interaction with participants in my study as it relates to student exchange programs, investing in satellite campuses abroad and virtual delivery of higher education. As a former insider with an outsider perspective, I approach my reflexive writing with personal reflections on how to increase collaboration between reputable universities in North America and national universities within the East African region.

Moreover, the development of global higher education and maintaining international collaborative partnerships in order for faculty, institutions, students, countries and continents to create healthy inter professional collaboration is at the core of my expertise for this Ed. D program. It is core because my faith in God inspires me to contribute to social justice and “international partnerships pave the way to world peace and social justice. We realize more each day that countries need each other; and that despite our differences, we can only move forward with the help and support of each other.” (Ma & Subbiondo, 2022).

We are reminded by Perry, et al., (2020), that it can be confusing for authors as an outsider and insider throughout the research process. But I do believe it is an added value, as an outsider collaborating with insiders for my problem of practice on the internationalization of

higher education because it has given insight into the problem at hand. My problem of practice is core to me as an African and more specifically Rwandan woman who understands the challenges faced in our education system even from foundational years up until higher education level. My passion lies in the advancement of higher education in Rwanda, I would like to make a significant contribution and impact in the quality of higher education.

I recognize that integrity, transparency and ethics play a major role in the research process. My conviction that higher education can improve in Rwanda through partnerships with world reputable universities setting up satellite branches and promoting fully online degrees drives my improvement in science research. This will also require me to put measures in place while engaging the methodology of my research for participants to thoroughly express their experiences. I will also work with insiders in cross checking evidence, results and conclusion.

My interviewees will be students, professors and leadership from the 2 universities I will be researching. In terms of power dynamics, the different categories of interviewees include working coworkers, some whom I supervise and others who are my leaders. This is manageable especially given the professional and respectful relationship that has been built.

It is worth noting that on a personal note, I am a product of both the African and American education system. As a researcher I have extensive perspectives from my educational background in both continents (including varying countries in Africa and in the United States of America). This will enable me to be objective while conducting my research. More specifically, I got both of the two worlds. I studied at an American boarding school in Nairobi, Kenya for 3 years. I can testify to the wealth of diversity, cultural inclusion, and holistic teaching of teachers from all over the world. This has significantly motivated my research interests in education and global partnerships.

Significance of the Study:

The significance of my study will attest to Jane Knight's commonly accepted working definition for internationalization as 'the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society.

The component of virtualization is also significant to my study and aligned to researchers, Moshtari & Safarpour (2023) who state that online and blended learning models have opened up new opportunities and issues for internationalization. Turning to online education and digitalization can provide several opportunities to academics, but doing so requires the necessary infrastructure and preparation which is among the analysis that will be conducted in my study. My study will contribute to literature to highlight how the present and future of global higher education partnerships should be equally “valuable operations that are transparent, inclusive, and socially impactful for meaningful cultural and intellectual exchange” (Lanford, 2014) and this is the impact that it will also have on ground.

During Covid19, it was proven worldwide that online learning is effective and precisely Massive Open Online Courses ‘MOOC’ platforms have proven to be a success in the case of Rwanda. For example, Rwanda comes second in Africa when it comes to signing up for online business courses, according to a new report by Coursera, one of the world's largest online skills and training providers. The report presented data on 100 countries drawn from Coursera's registered learner base of more than 124 million learners. It concentrated on data related to three of the most popular job-relevant skill domains: business, technology, and data science. (Kuteesa,

2023). My study will highlight the successes, challenges and areas of improvement for online learning in Rwanda and internationalization of higher education.

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