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CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This policy brief provides informative observations on how the World Bank's Africa Centers of Excellence Project (ACEP) has been implemented in Nigeria. The ACEP is a regional intervention that seeks to improve research and training capacity on the continent by lending financial and policy assistance to African countries and their respective higher education institutions. The ACEP is significant because it illustrates a current example of how international development organizations are working to bolster national development through tertiary education. Nigeria makes for an interesting case because on one hand, the country hosts the highest number of Africa Centers of Excellence (ACEs) that have been selected as recipients out of all the African countries. On the other hand, Nigeria is still behind in many ways regarding global standards for higher education. This policy brief will address the current Nigerian higher education context, the strengths and weaknesses of the ACEP, and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners moving forward. The data is drawn from a review of relevant publicly available documents as well as interviews with the leaders of participating centers. The expectation is that this policy brief may be used to advocate for improved quality of capacity building interventions from foreign aid agencies in Nigerian higher education institutions particularly, or across Africa more broadly.

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Acronyms

ACE- Africa Centers of Excellence

ACEP- Africa Centers of Excellence Project

AAU- African Association of Universities

ACE I- Africa Centers of Excellence Project Phase I

ASUU- Academic Staff Union of Universities

STEM- Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

UBE- Universal Basic Education

UNESCO- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Introduction

In recent times, leading higher education investors throughout the globe have expanded their investments in "excellence projects" to raise the quality and relevance of higher education institutions in developing countries. Millions of dollars directed at creating and funding "centers of excellence" that can act as worldwide leaders in the higher education arena are granted to states through these excellence programs (Chang, 2013). Centers of excellence, in essence, are dedicated centers that allow academics to work within disciplines and institutions on revolutionary initiatives that are both internally useful and internationally competitive (Li, 2019). For an example of recent excellence-driven policies and interventions, see Table 1 in Annex. Given the traditionally low levels of investment in research and development in Africa, excellence projects are a great asset as they provide a chance for financing while also bolstering advancement for African universities and their respective countries (Kwabena, 2011).

The Africa Centers of Excellence Project (ACEP), launched by the World Bank in 2014 to improve research and teaching capacity in the area, is one such excellence project. On the surface, the ACEP appears to be one, single project. However, it is actually composed of three separate phases under a common umbrella with the same goals and similar objectives that are diffused across different regions of the continent. The phases and funding amounts are: ACE I (\$165 million in West and Central Africa), ACE II (\$148 million in Eastern and Southern Africa), and ACE Development Impact (\$274 million in West and Central Africa). For my study, I focus explicitly on the ACE 1 Project.

The ACE 1 project goal was to: foster regional specialized knowledge between participating campuses in areas that focus on specific prevalent regional development obstacles; enhance these higher education institutions' capabilities to deliver world - class training and research methods; and also, to meet the demand for skills required for Africa's development, such as the extractive sector (Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence, 2022). Ultimately, 22 centers were chosen across the region through a competitive process based on criteria that were benchmarked to best worldwide practices (Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence, 2022).

At the end of the ACE 1 project period, many achievements had been achieved. In the ACE I's *Implementation Status and Results Report* (World Bank, 2020), the Bank highlights that it was able to exceed its end targets. The ACEP's lead evaluation officer, Adeline Addy (2020) stated that the project has achieved significant performance with all PDOs achieved, which purportedly confirms project effectiveness. To support this claim, Addy pointed out that 30,730 African students and 3,583 faculty have been trained, 2,593 research publications have resulted from their work, 9,070 practical internships have been undertaken, and over US \$50 million has been raised through external revenue generation.

While the ACE 1 achievements show the potential for African higher education institutions to perform when adequately funded, it is important to note that each country has unique contexts which affect how the program is implemented. In the next section, I cover various factors concerning the ACE 1 project in Nigeria specifically. In the next section, I cover various factors concerning the ACE 1 project in Nigeria specifically.

Guiding questions for policy brief:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses for the ACEP in Nigeria?
2. How can the ACEP, and similar initiatives, be improved upon in Nigeria and other African countries?

Current Nigerian Higher Education Context

The higher education landscape in Nigeria has been shaped by decades of changes before arriving at its current policy structure. As a result of this evolution, I see the current higher education landscape in Nigeria as a complicated, multiscalar environment that benefits from access to global markets while operating with increased pressure from domestic students, faculty, and staff. This complexity requires careful consideration when planning for interventions.

I mark the current era as beginning at the turn of the 2000's because this is when higher education globalization began to impact Nigeria and other African countries at increasing levels. During this time, international donors were encouraged to invest into African higher education as a jumpstart for building capacity in knowledge-based economies to support national and international development. For example, Jaumont (2016) chronicles the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEA) initiative led by a team of seven major foundations: the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Kresge Foundation. Together, this super-team invested close to \$500 million USD in the development of African higher education between 2000 and 2010. Initiatives like the PHEA are important because it reminds us that the biggest investors into African higher education are usually funders from the global North.

In 2021, Nigeria spent approximately N1.35 trillion (approximately 2.4 billion USD) on education spanning elementary, secondary, technical and vocational training, and higher education, as well as bureaucratic and supervision activities. The spending is totaled for the federal (N471 billion), state (N859 billion), and municipal governments (N25 billion). For the Sustainable Development Goals Education 2030 plan launched in 2015, participating countries (including Nigeria) committed to investing around 4 and 6 percent of their Gross Domestic Profit on education. As a result, by investing only 1.4 percent, Nigeria not only violates its own commitment, but also falls more than 2.5 percentage points short of the lowest limit (UNESCO, 2021). Considering this limited investment, it is no surprise that foreign-led education interventions like the ACEP and PHEA are on the rise.

Strengths of the ACEP

The main strengths that I've identified are: regional collaboration, funding for results, and dynamic leadership.

Regional collaboration

A key feature of the ACEP is its collaboration with various regional organizations that span the African continent. This makes sense given that the ACEP is a regional initiative. The strength comes in because the World Bank has provided a blueprint that can potentially be followed by all countries in the region.

By including the Association of African Universities (AAU), to serve as the project's Regional Facilitation Unit, the ACEP gains some credibility. The AAU is a regional network of African universities established in 1967 with headquarters in Accra, Ghana and claims to be "the voice of African higher education" (Association of African Universities, 2020). In its regular operations, the AAU works on various projects aimed at setting standards and recommending policies for the revitalization of HEIs across the continent (Ajayi et al., 1996). As the ACEP's implementing partner, the AAU is responsible for

liaising with universities and national governments with an emphasis on the monitoring and evaluation of performance indicators and drafting reports.

The focus on regional collaboration is important because it aims to carry along all African countries. For the countries that don't have extensive tertiary education systems, they are able to collaborate with countries that do. For instance, The Gambia was able to send students to Nigeria and other countries because they have limited opportunities to study at home.

Funding for Results

As mentioned above, investment into the Nigerian education sector is extremely low. Due to this low investment, Nigerian higher education institutions have had to rely on external aid through grants and loans from foreign agencies like the ACEP. This is important because in most cases the funds for such initiatives in public universities would otherwise be unavailable.

One stipulation of the funding that makes the ACEP more effective is that it is "results-based". Results-based financing means that the centers are required to achieve specific milestones before receiving the funds. Therefore, the provision of finances for projects is predicated on the ascertainment of proper information regarding the achievements from the previous year.

The results-based financing is a systematic process that involves several stakeholders. First, the ACE findings are required to be submitted by the Center Leader. The ACE will aggregate the accomplished outcomes for each yearly distribution in the future and confirm that it has the appropriate background material in its archives to prove the results' attainment. The ACE, PSC Member/focal point, and the appropriate Ministry of the Government shall analyze the findings and provide information regarding the project results for that year through the National Performance and Review Committee (ACE, 2019). The AAU will check accomplishments with the World Bank, sometimes on a sample basis, and then report back. Finally, the World Bank will release the agreed money for that year's outcomes to the project account at the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Finance will transfer the monies to the ACE account at the university level through the standard budget process (ACE, 2019). This long process is intentionally designed to have the indicators verified before payment is sent. The results-based approach is good because it adds a level of transparency and accountability to the project. This way money is not just being given with nothing to show for it.

Dynamic Leadership

A major strength of this body is its innovative leadership structure and design which presents a stable front but is also capable of adjusting to changing circumstances. The ACE team at each university is to be directed by a Center Leader who is a recognized educator/researcher in the project's major discipline and backed up by professors from the relevant departments. The Center Leader is the person in charge of project delivery. The proposed new Center Leader must be intellectually and managerially qualified to take on the essential job of ACE Center Leader. The leaders are competitively selected with a focus on choosing the best based on a proven track record of performance. These leaders then go on to continue doing great work through the ACE 1 project.

Weaknesses of the ACEP

The main weaknesses that I've identified are: nation-wide strikes and inadequate funding

Nation-Wide Strikes

One of the main factors limiting the quality of higher education in Nigeria is the rate of strikes carried out by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). ASUU is a labor union that arose through exchanges amongst public workers in order to better Nigeria's learning

environment. ASUU strike activities occur for a variety of reasons, including government demands and disagreements with the university management. Sometimes the university's academic staff goes on strike, while other times the non-academic workforce goes on strike; in certain situations, they may all be participating.

Unfortunately, ASUU strike actions have frequently caused great worry among students, the government and other stakeholders in higher education institutions. These strike activities continue to lengthen the time students are expected to spend in school while also blocking initiatives aimed at improving the learning environment, such as the ACEP. Because of the increased length of time, students may choose to withdraw from school and devote their efforts to other ventures that they feel would be more successful, resulting in a waste of project resources. Strikes also have a detrimental influence on ACE's activities since they cause instability and uncertainty in school calendars, making the initiative unable to prepare adequately as a result.

Inadequate funding

Although the funds provided through the ACE 1 are greatly appreciated, the costs associated with running the initiative are enormous and budgets for such efforts should reflect this. Because only a few centers are selected the funding does not have a major impact on the country at large. For the ACEP to be more impactful there would need to be additional funding either provided by the national government or other institutions.

Recommendations

After reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of the ACEP in Nigeria, there are several key recommendations that I would make to policymakers and practitioners in the country who are looking to continue such excellence projects:

1. **Invest more intentionally into infrastructural development for higher education institutions.** A majority of centers and universities lack the basic infrastructure (laboratories, equipment, facilities, etc.) for achieving excellence. At the same time, access to these items has a tremendous impact on what centers are able to do.
2. **The participating centers need more institutional autonomy to be able to perform effectively.** Nigeria's public education system is riddled with bureaucratic obstacles that makes it difficult to work in a progressive manner. If centers have the autonomy to operate with limited interference, then they can accomplish more in a timely manner.
3. **Consider revising the key performance indicators for items that are more relevant to Nigeria.** As the project progresses, new realities will emerge and the organizers of excellence initiatives should be flexible enough to make necessary accommodations. It might be helpful for policymakers, in consultation with the project beneficiaries, to adapt what indicators are prioritized.
4. **Switch from the loans to grants so that the government is not burdened by additional debt.** Giving out the funds as loans potentially solves one problem yet adds to another. Considering the large amount of debt that Nigeria and other countries currently have, more loans is not advisable. If the excellence projects can be purely grant-based, then the impact will be more positive.
5. **Use the results-based financing approach to bolster transparency and accountability.** The results-based approach is a relatively new advancement in

the Nigerian development sector. All of the center leaders interviewed agreed that it has been a beneficial aspect of the ACEP because it held all participants accountable. In countries where transparency and accountability are not prioritized, this presents a game changer.

In summary, the ACEP is an exciting intervention that has the potential to transform the Nigerian higher education landscape. Considering the aforementioned strengths and weaknesses, it is imperative that the relevant stakeholders work together to advance these types of initiatives.

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Annexes

Annex 1: The list of national excellence-driven policies and initiatives.

Year	Country	Name of the policy	Allocated funds
2009	Russian Federation	National research university program	US\$1.6 billion
	Spain	International campus of excellence	US\$313.3 million
	Thailand	National research universities development project	US\$380 million
2010	Israel	I-CORE—the Israeli centres for research excellence	US\$360 million
	France	Excellence laboratories	US\$1.24 billion
2011	China	985 project (Phase III)	NA
	France	1. Excellence equipment program	1. US\$1.24 billion
		2. Excellence initiative	2. US\$9.53 billion
	Taiwan	1. Moving into top universities program	1. US\$330 million
		2. Teaching excellence program (second phase)	2. NA
Romania	Higher education reform bill	NA	
2012	China	2011 plan (Phase I)	NA
	France	Excellence initiatives for training	US\$185.8 million
	Germany	Excellence initiative (Phase II)	US\$2.97 billion
	India	Universities of research and innovation bill	NA
	Poland	Creation of “national centres of research excellence” (KNOW)	US\$90 million
2013	Russian Federation	Global competitiveness enhancement of Russian universities (“5–100”)	US\$880 million (2013–2017) (entire project will be implemented until 2020)
2014	Africa	Africa higher education centres of excellence	\$290.8 million (The World Bank)
	Japan	Top global university project	\$65 million (the project will be implemented for 10 years)
	Canada	Science technology and innovation strategy	\$1.3 billion (the project will be implemented for 10 years)

Source Salmi and Froumin (2013) adjusted

