

The International Deans' Course (Africa): Responding to the Challenges and Opportunities of Expansion in the African University Landscape

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Introduction

Expansion in the university sector in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America is a subject about which the different organizing teams of the International Deans' Course are reminded every other year when applications into the program are being processed, or when presentations for a new cohort are being prepared by the course faculty. Every two years, from one applicant recruitment cycle to another, new universities are seen to have been founded. Research by course faculty to determine the number of universities in a particular country or sub-region becomes outdated by the time of presentation – with participants from the concerned countries or regions often reporting that, in the three or so days they have been away from home attending the course, a number of new universities have been established.

For sub-Saharan Africa in particular, this expansion contextualizes the rationales and achievements of the International Deans' Course (IDC) which clocked ten years in 2017. In subsequent sections, I provide some insight into an expanding university landscape in Africa, describe the IDC as a means of responding to some of the effects of expansion, document some achievements of the IDC, and conclude with a brief account of lessons and challenges. I write both as an alumnus of the first cohort (2007/8) of the course and as faculty since 2010.

Glimpses into an expanding university landscape in Africa

Around independence in 1960, Cameroon had 1 university; by 2017 there were 120-odd university-type institutions, of which only 8 were public/state-owned (Folck 2016). In the immediate post-independence years, Ghana had 3; by 2017 the number had risen to 101, with 10 of these being public. Similarly, within two years of becoming independent in 1960, Nigeria had 5 universities; by 2017, the figure stood at around 153, with about 84 being public (Antia 2017). Between the 1970 establishment date of independent Kenya's first university (Nairobi) and 2017, some 70 universities

and accredited colleges were established (Onyango 2017, Mulinge et al. 2017). Specifically, between 2012–2013 alone, 15 fully chartered public universities were established in that country (Kiamba 2015). Ethiopia established 23 universities within eight years from 2004–2012, putting the figure of the country's universities (both public and private) at about 32 in 2017 (Abebe 2017; see also Mohamedbhai 2014). Needless to say, these figures have since changed.

Between 1970–2013, sub-Saharan Africa's gross enrollment ratio was the lowest of all world regions, because of the few students (less than 400, 000) in higher education in 1970. However, the region has within this 43-year period recorded the highest annual growth rate of 4.3% – compared to the global average of 2.8% (Darvas et al. 2017). The expansion in the sector is obviously a consequence of the massification of the demand for (differentiated) university education; in other words, the demand is not only for traditional types of research, elite-type universities, but also for new models or designs of university education.

There are a number of factors contributing to this demand: the massive investments in and enhanced access to primary and secondary education in the 1990s – graduates of which now seek especially university education (Mohamedbhai 2008, Bloom et al. 2005); a shift in the thinking around the nexus of education and development, resulting in greater importance being accorded to higher education than previously (World Bank 2002); increased role for the manufacturing and service sectors in economic development for which a knowledge-based workforce is required (Darvas et al. 2017); an increased labor market appetite for and consumption of university certification (Boateng & Ofori-Sarpong 2002); the introduction of non-traditional entry requirements, including different admission score thresholds, recognition of prior learning, remedial, bridging or foundation courses (Mulinge et al. 2017); flexible methods of delivering the curriculum, such as open and distance education (Altbach 2017); among others.

It was seen earlier that the private sector had the majority share (in terms of institutions rather than student numbers) in the provision of tertiary education in several countries. For this sector, growth has not only been driven by the foregoing demand factors, but by perceptions such as the following: that their program offerings enhance the market solvency of graduates (because these programs are informed by industry needs); that their processes are more efficient because the institutions are much smaller; that they are largely immune from state meddlesomeness; that they have stable (that is, undisrupted) academic calendars and offer students and their families a measure of time-to-degree certainty (since they have generally not experienced the extended periods of closure that have come to typify public universities in many countries); that their campuses allow for the inculcation of values (e. g. faith-based, moral, entrepreneurial) cherished by proprietors, families and other stakeholders; among others.

To return to public institutions, regrettably, expansion has not necessarily been matched by adequate funding. Concerns to address funding in African higher education (e. g. Okebukola (ed.) 2015) suggest that perhaps change for the better in financ-

ing (if any) has not been substantial since a 2010 World Bank report on financing higher education in Africa (World Bank 2010). Among others, the report presented the ratio between the change in the number of higher education students and the quantum of public resources allocated to current expenditure on higher education in select African countries for the period 1991–2006. See Figure 1.

In Figure 1, a number above 1 on the Y-axis shows the margin by which student numbers have increased over the increase in public resources. Concerns around disparities in funding begin to manifest with Ethiopia in the first set of countries, and this worsens progressively as we move to the second and third group of countries. Already in 2006, the increase in public resources allocated to higher education in the current expenditure of Mali was sevenfold less than the increase in student numbers.

Undoubtedly, expansion especially in the public university system has widened access for population segments beyond the traditional socio-economic status groups, age brackets, urban clientele, etc. However, without commensurate funding (and adequate planning), expansion has also led to anomalies in many national university landscapes. Firstly, an existing pool of lecturing staff, which in the past would have reproduced itself organically to service a university system of a planned-for size, suddenly has to support an enlarged system. Corollaries of this state of affairs include unsatisfactory staff/student ratios, teaching staff without PhDs, the use of part-time lecturers and the institutionalization of moonlighting, increased teaching and administrative load of staff, concerns around students' success rates, erosion of a research culture in those institutions that previously had it and the difficulty of developing such a culture in new institutions which have such aspirations (Reizberg & Rumbley 2010, Mohamedbhai 2014, Darvas et al. 2017).

Secondly, infrastructure to support core functions in teaching and learning as well as research has come under strain. Lecture venues, libraries, laboratories, residences and sanitary facilities sometimes now have to support “four times the number of students they were designed for” (Mohamedbhai 2014: 72). Okebukola reports on the findings of a 2012 survey of Nigerian universities commissioned by the national government. Among others, the survey showed that “many laboratories and workshops are old with inappropriate furnishing; [...] equipment and consumables are absent, inadequate or outdated; kerosene stoves used as Bunsen burners in some laboratories [...]; science-based faculties are running ‘dry lab’ for lack of reagents and tools to conduct physical/real experiments” (Okebukola 2015: 58).

Thirdly, expansion has also led to a thinning out of available management capacity and a consequent dearth of expertise to steer universities at a time when such management expertise is perhaps most needed. As far back as 2004, Tefera & Altbach had already noted that “By and large ... African universities suffer from poor, inefficient, and highly bureaucratic management systems” (2004: 31).

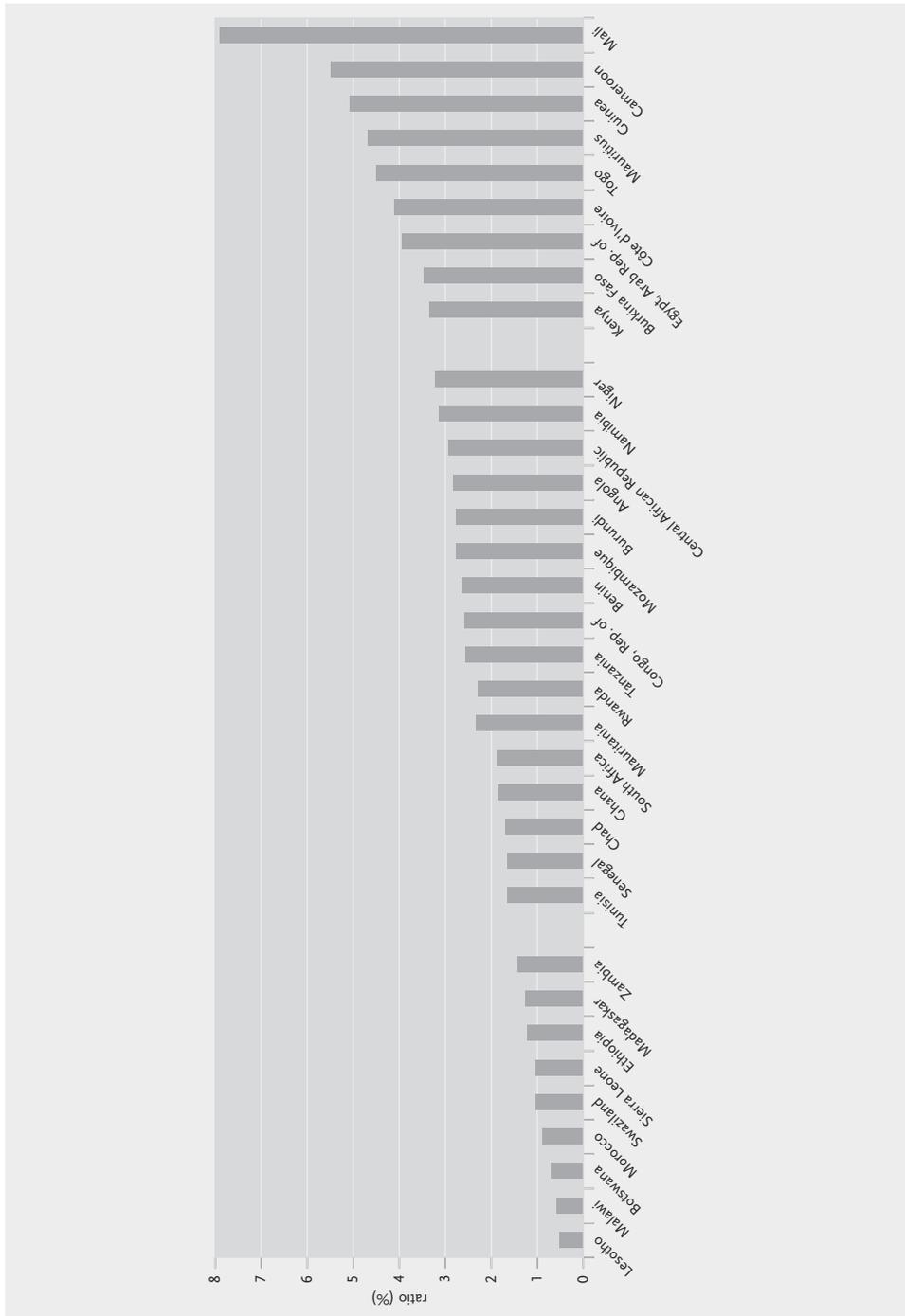


Figure 1: Relationship between growth in student numbers and available resources (Source: World Bank 2010: 19)

Classic management functions (of planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting) obviously become only more complex with reduced funding, huge student numbers from more diversified backgrounds, new stakeholder groups, changing operating/policy environments – all occasioned by the subsequent, bigger wave of expansion. Paradoxically, while universities have always been keen to train and certify individuals for roles out there in society, they have traditionally not attended to developing capacity for managing their own internal processes. Expansion and the concomitant competition for funding, regulatory approval of programs, visibility, students (prized for their fee-paying ability, talent, etc.), and so on, have revealed just how much of an oversight the neglect of course offerings in university governance was.

Enter the International Deans' Course (Africa)

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing that the International Deans' Course was conceived. Begun in 2007, the African IDC is one in a wider bouquet of response initiatives to the challenges and opportunities of expansion in the university sector. In one or the other of its characteristics (e. g. the scope of issues addressed, in-class and out-of-class learning sites, duration or length of time spent by each cohort, project action plan that needs to be implemented by participants, the mentoring arrangements, number of contact sessions, institutional roles of participants, the mix of participants, spread of partners and mix of experiences, etc.), the IDC would seem to differ from a number of comparable initiatives that either address a single theme (e. g. research capacity or quality teaching); are advisory in nature (e. g. on setting up quality assurance units); unfold as a once-off experience at a two- or three-day workshop; etc.

Developed, in part, on the experience of running a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Higher Education Management at the University of Applied Sciences Osnabrueck, Germany, the African (and Southeast Asian) IDC is a multifaceted capacity-building program to which further expertise is contributed by several other actors: Germany's think tank on higher education (the Centre for Higher Education, CHE), the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and the Free University of Berlin. The specifically African stream has trainers from universities in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa), Kenya (Taita Taveta) and South Africa (Western Cape).

Over an eight-month period involving three face-to-face contact sessions at different African and German locations, some 30 or so Deans, Deputy Deans, Heads of Department from 8–10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa are exposed to a curriculum that covers topics in: higher education systems (in Germany, Europe and Africa), changing nature of university governance, strategic faculty management, leadership, quality management, financial management, change management, human resources management, teaching and learning, research management, fund-raising, interna-

tionalization, the entrepreneurial university, soft skills, among others. Site visits to units at several universities are an integral part of the training – one which affords participants the opportunity to appraise/critique theoretical insights received in class-like settings. Participants also engage in a number of role-playing activities in the context of peer consulting sessions.

A critical component of the course is the project action plan in which participants apply insights learnt to the conceptualization, design and implementation of a project that adds value to their home institutions (sample projects in Textbox 1 below). Participants are assigned mentors from within the training team, and are expected to provide periodic reports as well as a final report at the last contact session which is usually held in Addis Ababa. The IDC curriculum is, thus, a fairly rounded one that seeks to equip participants with the knowledge, tools and experiences to respond to challenges and opportunities in their operating environments.

The choice of participating countries (admittedly only from among states that have English as official language) reflects, in the main, environments in which expansion of the university sector has been rather remarkable: Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Sudan. Malawi has participated intermittently, and both Rwanda and South Africa have participated once, in the very first course. The manner in which the course has responded to several of the challenges and opportunities of expansion can be gleaned in the subject matter of participants' project action plans. Textbox 1 gives a sense of the over 140 projects (between 2007–2017) undertaken by African participants.

Textbox 1: Sample project action plans for IDC Africa (2007–2017)

1. Strategic Plans for Effective Teaching and Management of Large Classes in Redeemer's University
2. Developing an Induction Programme for New Academic staff for Quality Teaching at Kenyatta University
3. Building a Quality Blended E-learning System at the Graduate School in Ghana Technology University College, Accra
4. Introduction of e-learning platform (ELP) for the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK), Awka
5. Developing and Implementing a Quality Management Strategy for Teaching and Learning at Taita Taveta University College
6. Establishment of a Common Laboratory at the Faculty of Chemical and Physical Sciences, Addis Ababa University
7. Towards the Establishment and Operationalization of a Temporary Physics Laboratory at Kibabii University College
8. Five-Year Research Laboratory Development Roadmap for the College of Natural and Computational Sciences, Haramaya University
9. Five-Year Staff Development Plan for the Faculty of Medicine at Gulu University
10. Strategic Plan for the School of Informatics, University of Dodoma

11. Strategic Plan for the Faculty of Science, Chancellor College, University of Malawi
12. Developing Guidelines for Response to Gender Based Violence at Maseno University
13. Development of a Two-year Strategy Map for the Graduate School (University of Professional Studies, Accra) using the Balance Scorecard Concept
14. Income Generation Strategy for the Faculty of Language Studies, Addis Ababa University
15. Alternative Internally Generated Funds Mechanism at the Nasarawa State University, Keffi
16. Quality Management at School of Pharmacy, Ahfad University
17. Management of student registration process for decision making at Egerton University
18. Developing an Orientation Programme for Newly Appointed HODs in the Faculty of Arts, University of Uyo
19. Faculty Manual for Facilitating Thesis Writing in Science at the University of Ngaoundere
20. A Strategy to Promote Research and Consultancy Culture in the Faculty of Science and Technology – Mzumbe University
21. Building a sustainable research culture at Central Business School, Central University of Ghana
22. Development of a Research Strategy in the Department of Literary and Communication Studies, Laikipia University College
23. Strengthening the Research Capacity of Academics in the Department of Food Science and Engineering at the Faculty of Engineering and Technology, Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho
24. Introduction of an Annual Research Day in the Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Benin
25. Upgrading the National University of Sudan Research Institute to a Centre of Excellence in Molecular Biology and Bioinformatics

In the pre-expansion era, it was perhaps natural in many environments to assume that the system had taken care of several of the issues in Textbox 1, that is, where the issues even arose. The fact of individual academics having to initiate action on these issues perhaps speaks volumes about the state of affairs in their institutions. From Textbox 1, we see participants keen to address a range of issues in their home environments that are easily linked to system expansion and its consequences: concerns in teaching and learning, including the need for creative ways of developing, equipping and sharing laboratories (1–5); the dearth of attention to other aspects of faculty strategy, especially strategic plans (8–13) and fund-raising (14–15); the neglect of quality matters that enhance the institutional experience for both students and staff (16–19); and the need for (re)creating a research culture (20–25).

Figure 2 presents the distribution of projects according to theme and participant cohort.

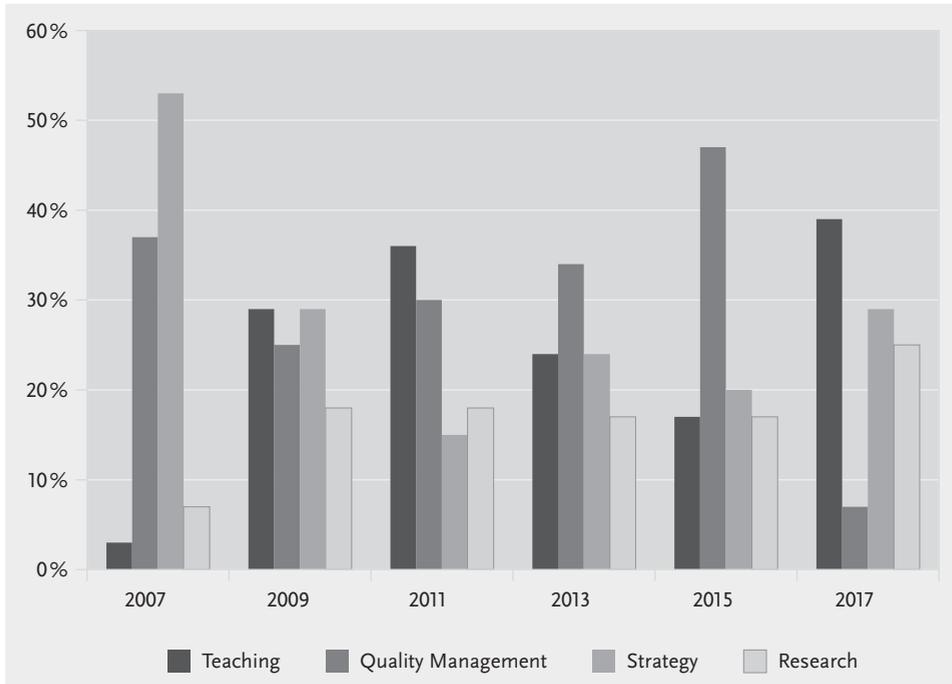


Figure 2: Project action plans per cohort – IDC Africa

It is instructive that a majority of the participants in the very first African cohort in 2007 saw quality management and strategic management as the major concerns in their institutional environments, concerns in respect of which they were prepared to be agents of change. This choice may also have been shaped by the thrust of the curriculum in that very first course, even though it must be stressed that participants independently chose their topics, based on perceived institutional needs, individual capacity, and so on. An inference to be drawn from the pattern of choice of the very first cohort is an overriding concern among participants to improve governance in their respective institutions. Whether the course reminded them of a bygone era of institutional management or simply provided the lens for viewing what needed to be fixed, participants overwhelmingly chose to work on governance issues.

Research and teaching, which were not as prioritized in 2007, have since the 2009 cohort become more important. When the figures are disaggregated by country, teaching elicits a fairly consistent cross-country interest, even though there was initially no module devoted to the subject. As was seen in Textbox 1 presented earlier, responding to the unsatisfactory lecturer/student ratio or to the student/laboratory facility ratio and so on were recurring themes. The picture for research, however,

differs remarkably. For Nigeria, which has traditionally had many Alexander von Humboldt fellows as participants, research has had a rather strong appeal.

Some achievements of the IDC

In the ten years of IDC Africa, there have been over 140 institutional quality improvement projects carried out by IDC participants spread across over 80 universities. Beyond the numbers, chapters of this book (admittedly not all from IDC Africa) give a palpable sense of what a project in the IDC course is like, the vision that drives it, the impact it has, and the knowledge base from which it derives. Participants typically report that the course provides them the lenses to see challenges and opportunities in their institutions, or enables them to put a name to, and a context around, observations they routinely make, but are usually not able to process any further.

It is not only the 140-odd participants of IDC Africa (between 2007–2017) who have benefitted from the course. The second contact phase of the course has often incorporated open sessions which interested persons in the host environment have attended. Alumni of the IDC as well as of other programs under the Dialogue for Innovative Higher Education Strategies (an initiative supported by the German Academic Exchange Service and the German Rectors' Conference) have organized multiplication workshops across the continent. In sum, a critical mass of individuals trained in higher education management is gradually being developed across countries of sub-Saharan Africa, thanks to the IDC. Accepting the inevitability of expansion, it is through trained individuals such as these that the opportunities associated with expansion in the university system may well be leveraged and the otherwise negative effects mitigated.

Apart from those who attended the IDC while they were already Deputy Vice-Chancellors, many of the alumni have stepped into important leadership roles in African universities. Without exception, they credit the IDC for the courage they had to apply as well as for their success in the selection process. Thus, among others, the following alumni hold or have recently held executive leadership positions: Hamadi Boga (Vice Chancellor, Taita Taveta University, Voi, Kenya), John Okumu (Deputy Vice Chancellor, Kenyatta University, Kenya), Charles Igwe (Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Nigeria), Daniel Obeng-Ofori (Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Energy and Natural Resources, Ghana), Charles Esimone (Deputy Vice Chancellor, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria), Alem Mehbrahtu (Vice President, Adigrat University, Ethiopia), Puplampu Bill Buenar (Vice-Chancellor, Central University of Ghana), Peter Barasa (Acting Deputy Principal, Alupe University College, Kenya), Peace Chinedum Babalola (Vice-Chancellor, Chrisland University, Abeokuta, Nigeria), Adeyinka Aderinto (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Ibadan, Nigeria), Joseph Bosire (Acting Vice Chancellor, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya), late Yudah Ayodo (Deputy Principal, Kaimosi University College, a constituent college of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology,

Kenya). Not to be outdone by their mentees, two of the African trainers themselves have moved up: Abebe Dinku (as Vice-President of Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia) and Christine Onyango (as Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Taita Taveta University, Kenya). In private communication with one or the other of these alumni, it has become obvious that they are putting to good use insights obtained from IDC in order to respond to concerns in their environments. One recently spoke about introducing the project action plan concept to her principal officers.

The success of the IDC streams for Africa and Asia has spawned a number of related initiatives, such as the Latin American IDC stream and other capacity-building projects by some of the project's partners, such as workshops addressed to university vice-presidents in Germany, Ethiopia and Kenya.

As the contribution by Wolf and Wilde to this volume indicates, evaluation of the IDC by the Boston College Center for International Education as well as by the SYSPONS agency indicates that the course is addressing a need in a somewhat unique manner.

Conclusion

In commemorating the tenth anniversary of the IDC, this contribution has placed the IDC within the context of developments in African higher education. Specifically, expansion of the university system, which has not everywhere been underpinned by a rational planning model, has seen the system hit quite a bit of turbulence. From this anomalous situation, however, have arisen opportunities such as the IDC to create a generation of disciplinary experts that are also knowledgeable in facets of higher education management.

To reflect briefly on lessons learned and challenges encountered, it has become obvious that incorporating the project action plan (PAP) into the design of the IDC was an excellent idea for a range of reasons. Epistemologically, for participants as much as for faculty, the PAP has turned out to be a means of verifying or reinforcing knowledge of a more theoretical nature shared in the first contact phase; it has sensitized participants and faculty to complementary knowledge required for the success of projects in different environments; the reporting requirement associated with the PAP has seen participants attending to otherwise unnoticed learning experiences; more broadly, though, the PAP and the IDC as a whole have been reported by participants and alumni as catalysts for acquiring additional management knowledge of relevance to higher education.

In terms of the profile of stakeholders, because the PAP is a stimulus for and a means of introducing (beneficial) change in home institutions, it has enhanced the stature and institutional leadership credentials of their implementers. PAP implementers have on occasion been surprised by the quality of support they have received from their principals, or by requests for their projects to be rolled out in other units of the institution. It would seem to have also created positive publicity for the

collective expertise of the German-African team and for this particular German model of development cooperation in the higher education sector (represented here by the DAAD, HRK, CHE, University of Applied Sciences in Osnabrück, AvH and the Freie Universität of Berlin).

A challenge encountered by participants was the very designation of the project to be undertaken. Initially called personal action plan, it created an impression in some institutional environments that the task was simply that of the course participant. Buy-in from colleagues was incredibly difficult. The term was most unfortunate because it in fact negated some of the content that is covered in change management and strategic management that emphasizes team work. The term was promptly changed, with 'project' taking the place of 'personal', making it thus possible to keep the likeable PAP acronym. With this new term, marketing the idea as a collective enterprise has been reported to be easier (especially in light of greater consultation – see below).

It was also realized that, sometimes, the pressure experienced by participants to come up with a topic within the first week of the course did not always allow for optimal decision-making. In the first week, participants are exposed to a barrage of sometimes completely new management information. Admittedly, as part of the application procedure, would-be participants are asked to describe a quality improvement project they would want to embark on as part of the course. Experience has shown that this write-up is frequently more useful for determining how deeply invested applicants are in the university system than for assessing appropriateness (within the IDC context) of project ideas. As a consequence, a lot more flexibility and support have been introduced. There are extended presentations on the PAP concept, including discussing the PAP reporting template. There are discussions of sample PAPs. Even while participants are encouraged to come up with topics especially in week 2 (devoted to site visits in Germany), a final choice is delayed until participants are back to their home institutions and have had a chance to consult and better determine feasibility.

The challenge of time to follow through on the PAP commitment is a real one for individuals who also have a host of other institutional mandates. An attempt to mitigate the effects of this challenge has been made by insisting that participants take on projects that are within their purview or institutional sphere of influence. It is stressed that while a project by definition is a non-routine activity, it is important to take on tasks that are closely aligned to one's core functions. Developing a strategic plan for responding to an issue in research or teaching would be quite consistent with the portfolio of a (sub) Dean in charge of research and teaching, much more than getting the entire institution to embrace a particular novelty. In the past, projects such as the latter turned out to be quite demanding and a qualified success. Although for logistic reasons PAP mentoring is country-based (that is, participants from a given country are assigned a mentor irrespective of topics), encouraging the building of informal clusters of participants working in a given thematic area across

countries has been found to enhance experience-sharing and to sustain commitment.

In sum, the success of the IDC in its first decade has been the result of a number of factors: the underlying vision and its timing (given developments in the African and global higher education landscape); the flexibilities introduced and the alertness of the faculty to change course when things are not working; enthusiastic participants and their supportive institutional managers; a dedicated support staff, a collegial faculty and the goodwill they enjoy from their respective organizations; and of course the DAAD for the financial support.

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