

Factors Affecting the Growth of Internationalization Among Universities in East Africa: Opportunities and Challenges in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative

Authors

- Simon Obwatho Ph.D., Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic & Student Affairs, Africa Nazarene University, Nairobi (Kenya)

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing the growth of internationalization among universities in East Africa, specifically in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi, within the strategic context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI's emphasis on infrastructure development, trade connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges has amplified opportunities for East African higher education institutions to deepen global linkages. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, the study collected data from university administrators, faculty, students, policymakers, and international office staff. Findings indicate that regional cooperation under the East African Community (EAC), the widespread use of English as a medium of instruction, and engagement in global research networks have significantly advanced internationalization. The BRI has further expanded prospects for cross-border academic mobility, joint research with Chinese universities, and harmonized academic programs that align with global standards. East African higher education institutions face significant challenges to internationalization, including inadequate infrastructure such as student housing and ICT facilities, limited funding and lack of dedicated internationalization budgets, and bureaucratic visa and immigration processes that hinder mobility. Delays in documentation have left some international students in prolonged undocumented stays, restricting movement for fear of arrest. Other barriers include language diversity, curricular mismatches, and slow recognition of foreign qualifications even within EAC states. Universities with stronger BRI partnerships reported higher research output, greater mobility, and improved access to advanced technologies. The study recommends harmonized regional and bilateral policies with BRI partners, the establishment of targeted funding schemes, investments in modern learning infrastructure, and intercultural competence training for staff. Such measures are essential to leverage the BRI as a catalyst for positioning East African universities as competitive and globally relevant players in higher education.

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