

Mauritius as a Regional Hub for Higher Education in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The internationalization of tertiary education under the GATS has allowed the expansion of different forms of cross border tertiary education worldwide, including in Africa although with a lagged effect. However, due to some difficulties of commercial providers to settle in the African continent associated with the lack of resources, the outbound mobility of African students is the most common form of cross border education. Combined with the efforts of the African communities to promote intra regional mobility, this represents a considerable opportunity for Mauritius to emerge as a regional hub. The aim of this conceptual paper is to assess the potential and the challenges of the Mauritian government to achieve this objective. Data and information gathered has allowed to show the remarkable and sustainable growth of Mauritian tertiary Education sector in terms of enrollment of local as well as foreign students in a relatively short span of time. The exponential expansion has been possible through aggressive campaigns to attract international tertiary education providers (TEIs) and students from the region and at the same time through the establishment of an effective regulatory framework. While, this study has given insights of the potential of the Mauritian tertiary education and its rapid expansion, it has also highlighted the major hurdles in achieving the objective of positioning as a hub for the African continent. These are principally linked with the implementation of the recommendations of the regional communities in terms of harmonization and alignment of fees. Furthermore, the government will have to maintain the quality of education through consolidation of the quality assurance and through constant upgrading of competencies of academics. This study has shown that challenges can only be overcome by devising a strong long term funding strategy with the involvement of the private sector as well as regional and international donors.

Keywords: internationalisation, tertiary education, cross border education, student mobility, regionalization

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization and globalization of higher education and the inclusion of Education as one of the 12 tradable services in the GATS of the WTO (2011), has increased the importance attached to cross border education (Knight, 2006). Cross-border tertiary education is defined as the movement of students, academics, programmes, institutions/providers across the national borders. It encompasses several modes, including the mobility of students and programmes as well as the partnerships of educational institutions with foreign providers through collaborative arrangements such as articulation, twinning, franchising or on a distance learning mode. (Knight, 2005 and 2007 and OECD/World Bank, 2007). Cross Border Tertiary education has only relatively recently emerged in Africa through the mobility of international providers although the process is hampered by the lack of resources (African Union, 2006). The most significant form of cross border education in Africa is linked to the movement of students across borders. The literature depicts a high degree of dispersion

although reports from UNESCO-UIS 2012 conclude that student mobility in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) mostly lies within the region.

The ambition for Mauritius to establish itself as a regional hub in the Tertiary Education Sector has emerged as a result of the continuous and remarkable socio economic performance associated with an effective economic policy, and sound governance. In the context of the African continent, Mauritius stands out as a success story largely attributed to the investment in education which is a key value in the Mauritian society. The government, conscious of the importance of education to the economic development of the country has over the years implemented strategies to attract foreign direct investments with the vision of transforming Mauritius into a knowledge hub and a centre for Higher Learning.

The main objective of this conceptual paper is gauge the potential for Mauritius to emerge in the long run

as a regional hub for tertiary education. The study will take stock of the evolution of cross border education in Africa as well as in Mauritius more particularly with respect to the enrollment of African students. This study will also address the future challenges of the Mauritian Tertiary Education Sector by assessing the role of the key stakeholders. Data for this study has been mainly retrieved from the reports published by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), which is the regulatory body responsible for streamlining the procedures for the implementation, registration and monitoring of TEIs in Mauritius. Further information has been gathered from interviews conducted with officials of the Board of Investment (BOI), which is the national agency for promotion of foreign direct investments from different emerging sectors of the economy and from accreditation and quality assurance officers from the TEC.

The rest of paper is organized as follows: Section 2 overviews the emergence of cross border education in Africa and underlines the strength of Mauritius to emerge as a regional hub. Section 3 analyses the evolution of the Mauritian tertiary education sector more specifically with regards to cross border mobility of students and institutions. Section 4 discusses the challenges that Mauritius would be facing to achieve the ambition of being a regional hub in terms of increasing international student population, ensuring quality and generating significant funding. Conclusion appears in section 5.

EMERGENCE OF CROSS BORDER TERTIARY EDUCATION IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

For many decades, the international development community has encouraged African governments to focus their educational development programmes on primary and more recently on secondary education. (Bloom, Canning and Chan, 2006). Tertiary Education has been neglected for many years. This could partly explain why Africa, more specifically Sub Saharan Africa has been lagging behind in terms of tertiary education development. (World Bank 2009) For example Sub Saharan Africa registered the lowest tertiary enrollment ratios in the world and many universities are in a critical condition in terms of resources and infrastructure. (UNESCO-UIS, 2010)

However with the growing evidence from literature about the importance of tertiary education in capacity development as well as poverty reduction, more and more policy strategies are being geared towards developing post secondary education sector. (Example, Ndulu 2004, Shahid et al, 2009, Azcona et al, 2008). However African universities are unable to absorb the increasing demand for tertiary education mainly due to lack of infrastructure and resources. In

that context the cross-border higher education, has been experiencing a growing trend in the Sub Saharan Africa. (Pillay 2008 and World Bank, 2010) As far as the cross border mobility of institutions are concerned, international Tertiary education providers are engaging in privately sponsored ventures jointly with public universities in many African countries to develop their physical implementation. According to Kufoniyi, (2009) the success of the public private partnerships for cross border education are being hindered by the diverging objectives of the stakeholders, the former having as objective of capacity building and the latter having more interest in generating profits. Furthermore the numerous difficulties faced by international providers when setting up in many African countries lie in the lack of resources in terms of qualified staff, ICT infrastructure, efficient management systems, access to scientific information. (African Union, 2006).

With the difficulties for cross border mobility of institutions in Africa, the most visible and significant form of cross border education involves the cross border mobility of students. In fact as per the reports by UNESCO-UIS (2012), students of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are among the most mobile worldwide, mostly in Europe, but with various degrees of dispersion over the destination countries. As depicted in the literature some of the main drivers for the choice of the country where they would pursue their studies involve access to education in terms of costs and programmes. (Mazzarol and Souter, 2002), the quality of delivery and recognition of the degrees (Mpinganjira and Rugimbana, 2009), future employment prospects and the possibility to migrate (Lin, 2007). However, one of the issues related to student mobility is linked to the extent of brain drain which is alarming as per the study by Okoli (2013). According to Economic Commission for Africa, more than 300,000 professionals have migrated outside Africa mainly due to the inadequacy of African governments to sustain and improve the quality of living in terms of security, Health Education and other social aspects of life.

However in the recent years, there has been a tightening of the student visa procedures for African students, making mobility towards the privileged destination countries more difficult for African students. For example there has been a drop of 40% of African student enrollment in the UK TEIs since 2010. On the other hand, one strand of literature has underlined the tendency for African students to stay within their regions or regional communities. For instance, UNESCO-UIS 2012 concludes that SADC student mobility mostly lies within the region, which is in line with SADC's vision for regionalization and intra-region mobility. For example, the SADC protocol on Education and Training recommends that

there is a quota of 5% reserved for admission of candidates from member countries in Education and training institutions at reduced tuition fees (SADC, 1997). Among the African countries which are directing their policies towards the tertiary education sector are Zambia, South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi. These countries are gearing their higher education sector towards innovation in view of seeking technological excellence. On the other hand, Mauritius has declared its vision to become a regional knowledge hub for higher education (Kotecha, 2012).

The vision for Mauritius to establish itself as a regional hub has emerged as a result of the continuous and remarkable socio economic performance attributed to an effective economic policy, and sound governance. In fact, several indicators gauging the investment climate, competitiveness and quality of governance have often ranked Mauritius high within the African region. For instance, Mauritius was ranked as the No.1 in Africa in terms of ease of doing business, economic freedom and governance, respectively by the World Bank Doing Business Survey 2013, the Canadian Fraser Institute and the 2011 Mo Ibrahim Index of African governance.

In view of boosting the Tertiary Education Sector, The BOI has implemented a knowledge cluster specifically for the promotion Tertiary Education which has been placed high on the agenda of the Mauritian policymakers. The strategies developed by the BOI are geared towards two main poles, one towards attracting cross border TEIs and secondly for increasing inbound international student population. According to Mohamudally-Boolaky and Padachi (2013), the main drivers attracting international education providers to set up business in Mauritius is the social and political stability of the country. The geographical and strategic position of the island as a gateway between Africa and Asia, emerges as another reason for foreign providers to opt for Mauritius. The bilingual workforce is also considered as an important factor allowing the possibility to tap both the Anglo-Saxon and the francophone markets.

OVERVIEW OF THE MAURITIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR

Evolution from 2000-2013

In Mauritius, participation at the tertiary level has improved with enrolment hovering around the 50,579 in 2013 and the gross tertiary enrolment rate (GTER) reaching 50.1%, compared with an enrollment of 16,735 students in 2000 corresponding to a GTER of 15.1%. In parallel, a significant expansion in the different types of entities that provide Tertiary Education have been observed for the past few years as depicted by *Figure 1*. The public TEIs have for

over the past ten years absorbed the majority of students joining the tertiary education in Mauritius.

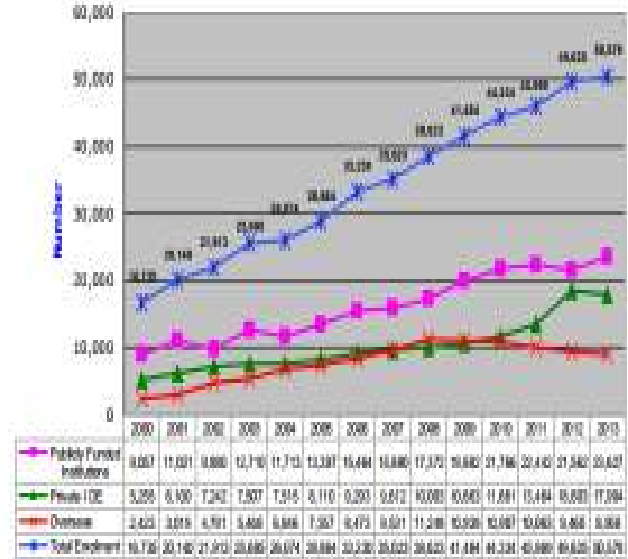


Figure 1: Evolution of Enrolment in Tertiary education 2000-2013

Source: TEC participation in the Tertiary Education 2013 Report (June 2013)

The most significant changes in the landscape of the Tertiary Education sector has been through the implementation of private TEIs in Mauritius. According to TEC (2013), there are currently 49 registered institutions which are operational. The different institutions are mostly affiliated with foreign providers of tertiary education through franchising, twinning articulation system, branch campuses or through the Distance Learning mode involving 91 awarding bodies, the majority being from UK and the others include India, Australia, France and South Africa. The increase in enrolment in private TEIs has been continuous and sustainable and in 2012, the enrolment in private TEIs has registered a further boost although it has decreased in 2013. In parallel, it can be observed that since 2009, more students have opted for the private institutions implemented locally rather than moving abroad for further studies. This trend has been confirmed and has even accentuated till now. This could be explained by the fact that with the increase in number of private TEIs affiliated with foreign providers, students have more and more scope and possibilities of obtaining an internationally degree locally at a relatively lower expenses.

In line with the National strategy to transform Mauritius as a regional knowledge hub, the government established the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). Padachi and Mohamudally – Boolaky (2011) depict the procedures set up by the TEC for registering private TEIs. It is to be noted that the “registration and accreditation obtained by cross border institutions are valid for only a certain

period for instance 5 years for registration and 4 years for a programme accreditation. The institutions have to go through a renewal process through the TEC, which does not give blanket approvals. The renewal of the registration by the TEC is pending to the efforts made by the institution in overcoming the weak points and consolidating its strengths.”

Once an institution has been registered, The TEC is also responsible for accreditation of the programmes offered by the institutions. The accreditation of a programme is subject to the satisfactory fulfillment of established criteria like the relevance of the modules contents with applications with the local as well as international contexts, the modes of delivery, the conduct of different forms of assessments as well as the qualifications of the resource persons. In view of promoting quality assurance, programmes have to go through reaccreditation processes after the completion of a cycle of 4 years involving close monitoring at different levels through regular site visits of accreditation and quality assurance officers

Foreign Students in Mauritius

Another important role of the TEC is related to the recognition and establishing equivalences of secondary and post secondary institutions. This procedure is crucial in view of the proper enrollment of larger international student population hailing from different education systems.

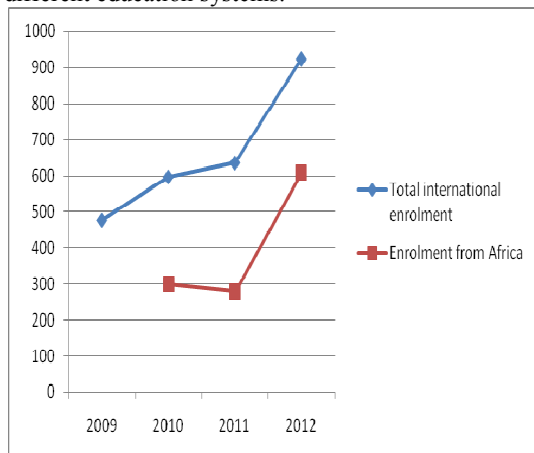


Figure 2: International and African students population enrolled in Mauritian TEIS

Source: Authors' own compilations

As depicted in *figure 2*, there has been a continuous and sustained growth of the enrolment of international students in our Tertiary Education system. The most important increase has been observed in the year 2012 where the international student population increased from 635 to 924 amounting to a growth rate of 45.5%. This trend is gathering momentum with an estimated figure of 2000 international students registered in 2013. The growth is accentuated in the enrolment from Africa,

whereby 608 African students were enrolled in the TEIs in 2012 compared to 279 in 2011, representing a growth rate of around 115%. 65% of the current foreign student population emanates from Africa and this represents a significant increase given that in 2011 the African student population constituted only 43.9% of the international students. This has been possible through the students fairs carried out by the BOI in some parts of Africa namely, Kenya. It is worth noting that more than 90% the international students were enrolled in the private TEIs, contributing to some extent to the significant increase in student population from 2011 to 2012 in these institutions

Figure 3 below shows the current African student population with respect to their regions of origin. The Eastern and Southern African regions constitute the majority of the students due to the proximity as well as the different co operations that exist with these countries promoting student mobility. Students from western Africa come in a large majority from Nigeria while the Northern and Central Africa represent a very negligible proportion of students. Furthermore 30% of the African student population emanate from francophone countries.

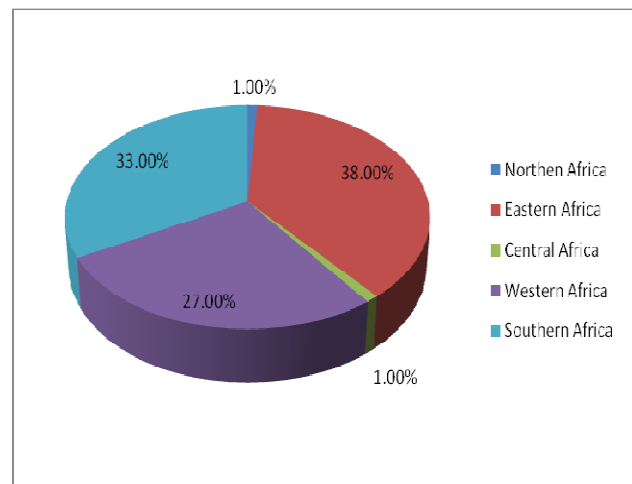


Figure 3 : Distribution African students enrolled in Mauritian TEIS in 2012 as per their regions of origin

Source: Authors' own compilations

CHALLENGES

Mauritius has indeed laid the foundation for the development of its cross border tertiary education. The BOI has been actively involved in the conduct of student fairs and investment promotion strategies in Africa and other parts of the world, namely India to attract foreign students and institutions. The BOI has also streamlined procedures for setting up business in Mauritius and other strategies are being developed to encourage internationals to engage in tertiary education in Mauritius. In fact, in the near future the government will be providing 3 new campuses with

integrated facilities at the disposal of TEIs in view of attracting more institutions of international renown. Some measures have also been taken to encourage students from African community to pursue their studies in Mauritius. For instance, the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Science Research and Technology awards a certain number of merit based scholarships to African nationals enrolled in public as well as private TEIs.

Although the above strategies have been successful to some extent, the government still has a long way to go and will have to take bolder initiatives. To increase the enrolment rate of African nationals, the government will have to operationalise the strategies developed from the regional integration perspective. For example Mauritius has not yet implemented one of the recommendations of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training in view of aligning the tuition fees of African nationals to that of local students (Butcher et al., 2008). Furthermore, as per the reports of the African Union (2007), harmonization through regional qualification framework as recommended by the SADC should be fostered to attract African students from various education systems to pursue higher studies in Mauritius.

Alternatively the Mauritian government could seek more collaboration with the African communities to work on schemes for need based scholarships to encourage citizens of poorer African communities to pursue post secondary education as part of country specific development and poverty reduction programmes. Furthermore, the BOI will have to gear towards more aggressive campaigns in Africa to tap other potential markets. For example, with the setting up of the Universite des Mascareignes and other privates TEIs affiliated with French universities, the francophone market should also be prospected for international students.

The key to the success of any Tertiary Education sector is largely dependent on the quality of education imparted. (Okebukola, 2012). The TEC has established well-developed and effective procedures in terms of quality assurance and audit. (Hayward 2006). However, some recent events pertaining to accreditation and recognition of institutions affiliated with Indian institutions have underlined the existence of some loopholes in the current framework. More effort should be deployed in continuously reinforcing the national regulatory framework to meet the upcoming challenges with the rapid growth of cross border education. In the long run the government could envisage an independent non-governmental accreditation and quality assurance agency like in the USA, which according to Hayward (2006), increases the legitimacy of the framework. Quality of teaching is also central for a high level education system. This can only be sustained with the involvement of high

level academics, who are able to strike a balance between the fostering of academic knowledge and equip students with the skills needed to evolve professionally. (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012). This can only be possible if academics benefit from external simulations through interactions with regional and international counterparts in the form of collaborative research. Academics should also be encouraged to involve in consultancy and partnerships with the industry to prevent isolation from business and work-based realities.

The challenges facing the Mauritian tertiary education sector can only be realized through an adequate long term funding plan which would not be achievable through exclusive public financing. (Kotecha 2012). The Mauritian government should deploy means for generating alternative funding solutions which would lie in public private partnerships and search for regional and international donors.

CONCLUSION

The landscape of the worldwide Tertiary Education has evolved drastically over the past decades with the emergence of cross border education. The African continent has also experienced, though with a lagged period, the effects of cross border education through the commercial presence of international providers in the continent. Nevertheless this process is hampered greatly in many regions by the lack of resources. In parallel outbound students mobility is most common in Africa with a relatively high degree of dispersion. However, with the considerable efforts being made within the African communities, for instance the SADC, students are being given incentives to pursue their higher studies within the region. This represents an opportunity for member countries like Mauritius to tap the African nationals.

Mauritius stands as an example in Africa with remarkable socio economic development and has been ranked first in different areas like the ease of doing business, governance and economic freedom. This has been possible through the massive investment in education. In the past decade the government has successfully geared its strategies towards developing the Tertiary Education Sector which has experienced sustainable and continuous expansion. The implementation of cross border TEIs has contributed to the significant increase in the GTER to 46.6% in 2012, increasing access not only to the locals but also to the international student community through the aggressive campaigns of the BOI. The African student population has increased by more than 100% since 2011.

The performance of the Mauritian Tertiary Education Sector in such a short span is indicative of the potential for the country to emerge as a regional hub.

However there are still many challenges that will have to be faced in the near future. Mauritius will have to implement several recommendations of the African community like preferential tuition fees and the harmonization of the education systems. In parallel with attracting more foreign students and institutions, the Mauritian government will have to ensure that the quality of the education provided is not compromised. This will be possible through the reinforcement of the regulatory framework of the TEC to ensure more efficient monitoring and quality assurance and through the continuous upgrading of competencies of academics. A proper funding strategy and action plan will have to be established by seeking partnerships with the private sector as well as regional and international donors to make the vision of becoming a knowledge hub a reality.

This paper has allowed to give an insight of the evolution and potential of Mauritian tertiary education sector based on analysis from the policymaker's and regulator's point of view. However, further research will be required to evaluate the real potential and challenge from the international students as well as the TEIs' perspectives.

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